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NOVEL

THE LAWMAN RIDES ALONE

by GALEN C. COLIN

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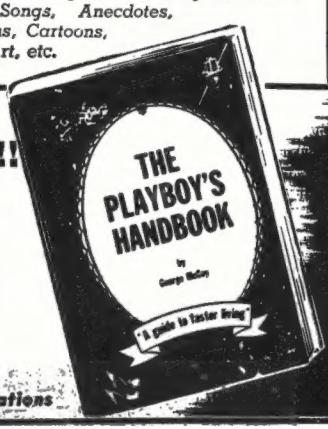

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WESTERN ACTION

VOL. VII, No. 3 AUGUST, 1942

A COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

(FIRST MAGAZINE PUBLICATION)

THE LAWMAN RIDES ALONE ..... **by Galen C. Colin** **10**

They sent two good men out after Slash Gratton and the good men died. And Gratton boasted of his collection of lawman's badges. But Buck Barton knew better than to make a frontal attack on the wily outlaw and his bushwhack gang. He knew something that Gratton didn't know—that he, Barton, could pass for an outlaw known as the Tomichi Kid, and that the real Tomichi Kid was pushin' up daisies in Boothill. But smart as he was, Buck overlooked one thing—riding alone as he was, masquerading as that coyote, the Tomichi Kid, Barton was caught between the wolves that rode with Gratton, and the respectable cowmen of the town!

3 GUNSWIFT SHORT STORIES

COLTSWIFT MEDICO ..... **by Henry M. Truesdell** **80**

When young Lazenby took to his guns, the erstwhile doctor found out that shooting men up was more fascinating than sewing them up afterward!

THE LONG TRAIL BACK ..... **by Lee Floren** **90**

There in jail, Monroe kept hearing about his ex-partner, Mark Harvey, who had run out on him. Harvey had gone straight; Harvey had married the girl Monroe loved; Harvey was now a sheriff. And he heard, too, that a drygulching outfit was aiming to make Harvey ex-sheriff, by virtue of their sixguns. So Monroe broke jail, hit the trail to the little town where Harvey was trying to make amends for his past—Monroe wanted to see those sheriff-hunting outlaws, too!

THE DEVIL TAPS THE WIRES ..... **by Fred W. Bales** **98**

U. S. Marshal Kilrain had to find the ghost who was tapping the wires, because the finger was on him as the "brains" behind the payroll bandits!

SPECIAL FEATURE

MOKELUMNE—GATEWAY TO HELL ..... **by Kenneth P. Wood** **110**

A true fact article of the old West.

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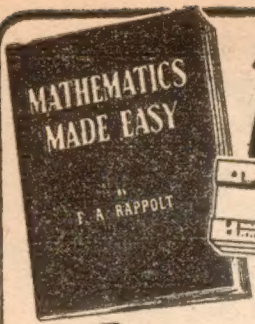

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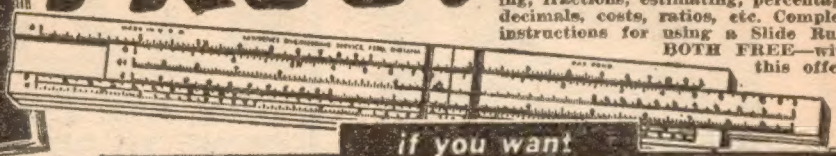

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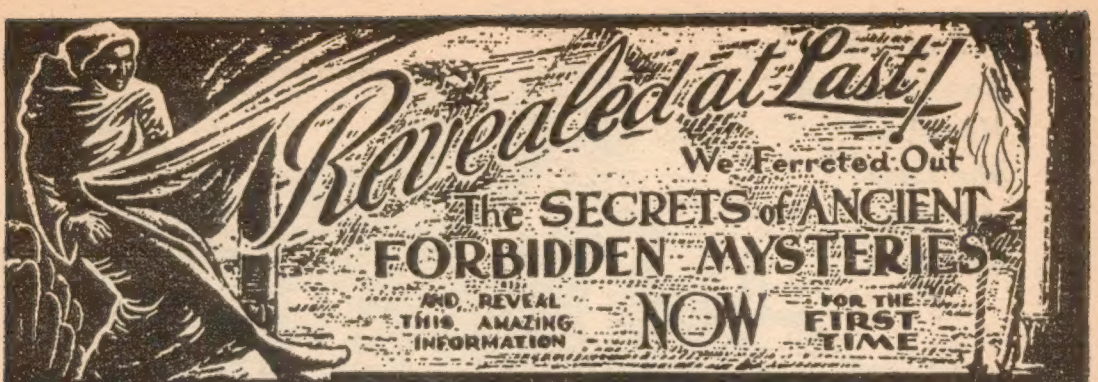

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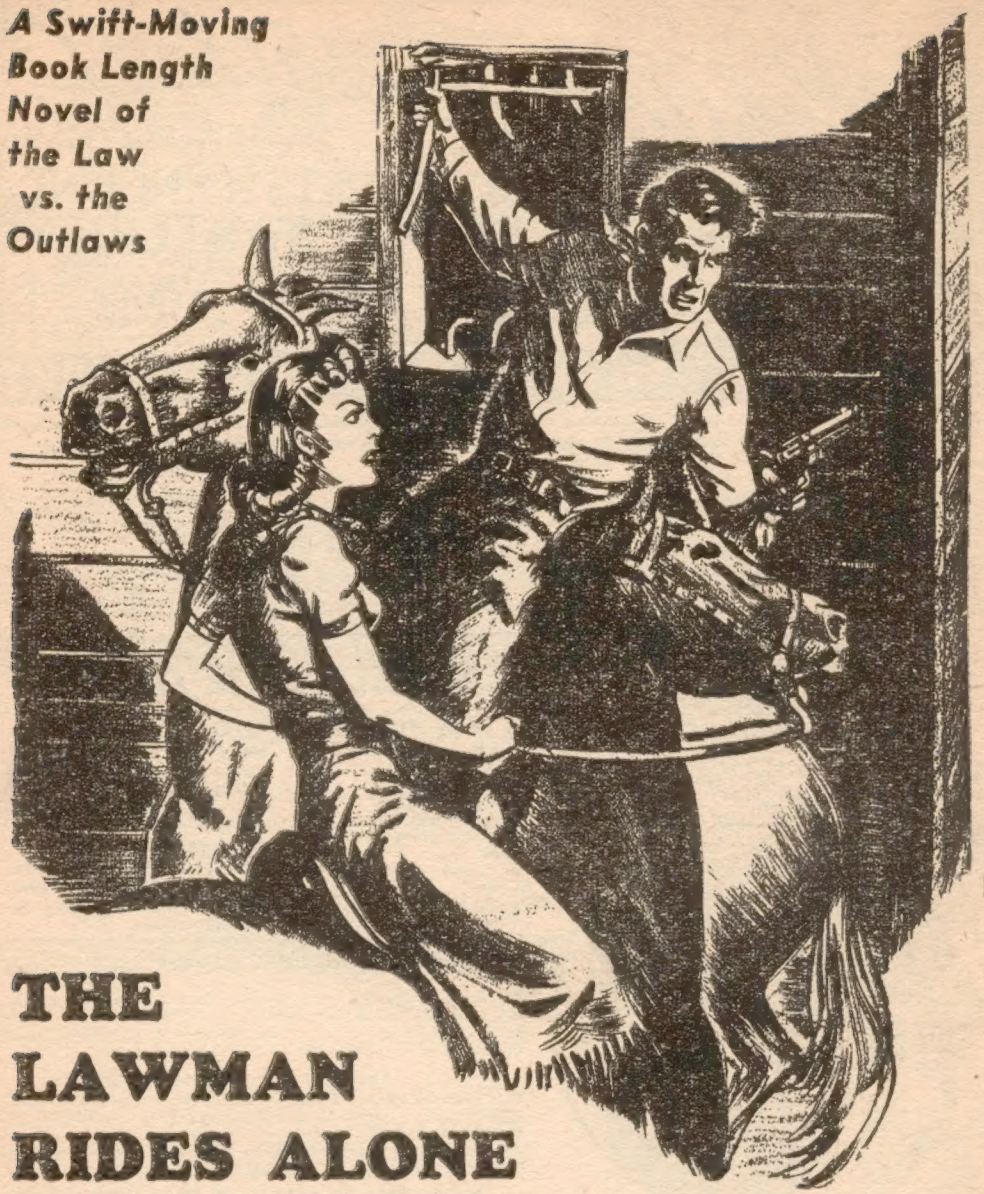
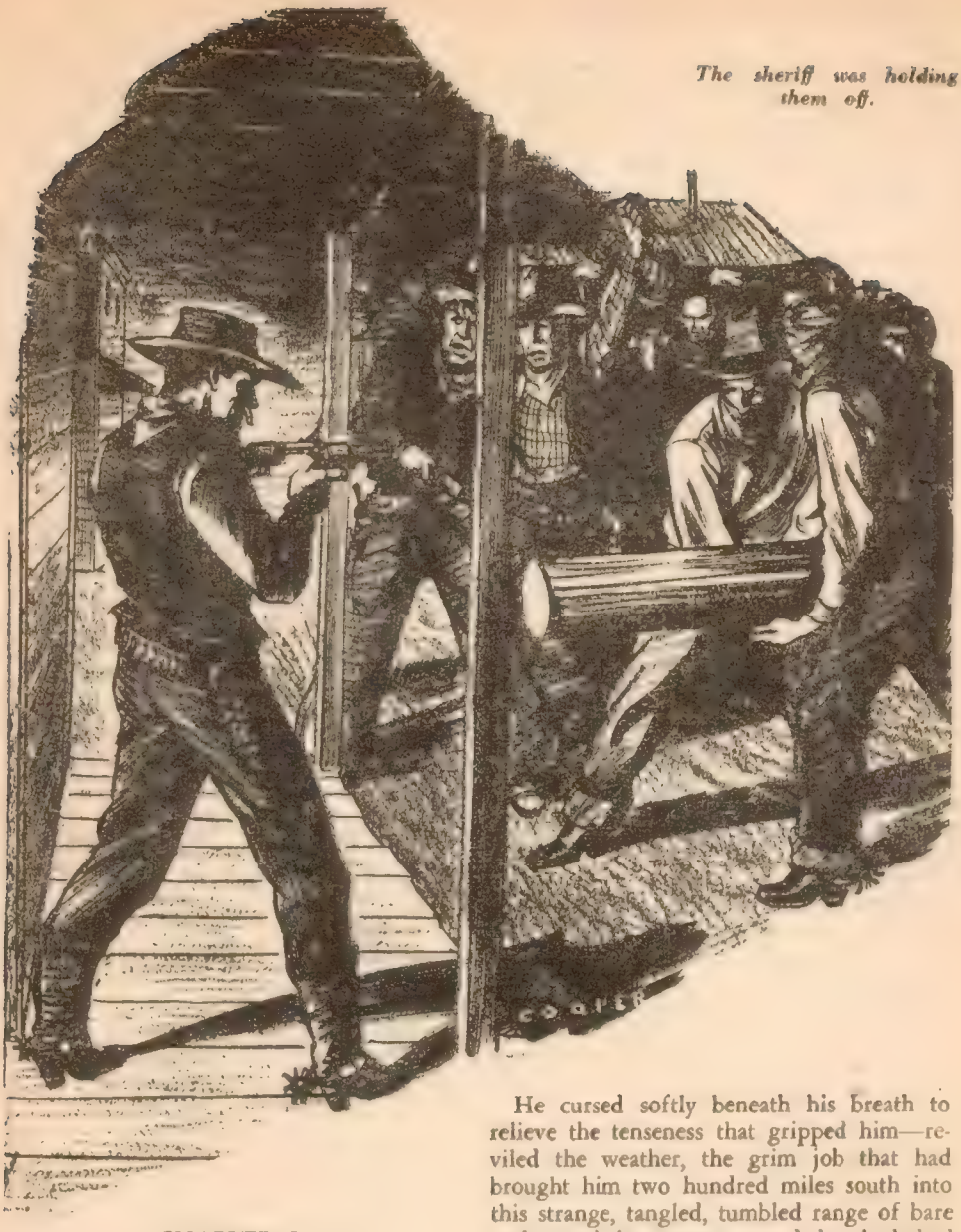


THE LAWMAN RIDES ALONE

by GALEN C. COLIN

Buck Barton, special deputy, knew that the notorious "Tomichi Kid" was dead, but the outlaw leader Buck was trailing, Slash Gratton, didn't. So it seemed like a smart move for Buck to pose as the Kid—he looked enough like the dead man to get by. But he hadn't realized how successful his posing would be until he found himself in jail awaiting the hangman, believed by none, and he alone knowing of Gratton's plans for a cunning raid. . . .



The sheriff was holding them off.

CHAPTER I

POSSE IN SKULL CANYON

BUCK BARTON slouched in his saddle beneath the scant overhang of the ledge. The steady rain that dripped from the sodden sky beat a watery tattoo upon the flat rock above his head—spilled over in trickling streams that filled the curl in the broad brim of his battered J. B.—that found the weatherworn cracks in his yellow slicker.

He cursed softly beneath his breath to relieve the tenseness that gripped him—reviled the weather, the grim job that had brought him two hundred miles south into this strange, tangled, tumbled range of bare rocks, twisting canyons and brush-choked valleys. But in spite of his apparent bravado, uncertainty rode him with sharp rowels.

"Simms an' Lassiter both fell down on it," he muttered. "Them the best gunslingers ol' Tom Durham had. Both of 'em pushin' up a head of rocks somewhere in these cussed canyons. Slash Gratton, the curly wolf that gunned 'em down, still ridin' the hills."

He settled himself still lower in his saddle. He shrugged the slicker higher around

his ears. This gloomy weather was enough to get any young hombre down. Add to that the memory of his two closest friends, Tom Durham's deputies, moldering beneath cairns of stones, and there was plenty of reason for his depression.

But thoughts of Slash Gratton, ruthless killer, cunning road-agent, kept alive the smoldering anger in his heart. "My first job—an' the toughest Tom Durham ever passed out," he grunted again. "Nobody to blame but myself, if I stop a ton of lead. I asked for it—an' I got it!"

For four hours Buck Barton had lurked in this cover—out of sight himself, but with the vast sweep of miles of dripping tangle, misty valleys and cloud-tipped peaks before his eyes. Plenty of time to go over the whole deal a dozen times. Buck Barton admitted bitterly that the chances were more than even that he'd be the third deputy for Gratton to tally.

He could recall Tom Durham's very words, after the old U. S. marshal reluctantly had listened to his pleas. "All right, Buck. You can tackle it," Durham had said slowly. "You've got an idea that might work—though I wish you were a mite older—more experienced. If Simms an' Lassiter wasn't your best friends—if you didn't look a heap like the Tomichi Kid—I wouldn't hear of it."

Now here he was—a lone man with an untried gun, in the dripping and fog-drenched Sagauche range. Below, and a half mile to the left, the twisting brown trail from Eureka dipped down into the narrow, rock-walled canyon, to emerge a half mile to the right, and wriggle on toward Cobalt.

Beyond the canyon the hills piled up, gray and shapeless in the mist and low-hanging clouds. It was here that Buck Barton hoped to make his first contact with Slash Gratton and his outfit. For the stage from Eureka was due right now—and it carried ten thousand dollars in bullion. Slash Gratton would never pass up such a haul—and Skull Canyon was his favorite place for a stickup.

"Hope Tom Durham didn't fall down," Buck muttered. "Hope he let the word get to Gratton that the gold is in the boot of Cimarron Thompson's stage. An' I hope that I can time it—"

His muttered words broke off short. His broad shoulders straightened as if a load had shrugged from them. The hours of watching, waiting, of doubt and speculation were over. Action was due right sudden, for a half-dozen riders were emerging from the curtain of dripping fog beyond the canyon—were picking their way down toward the rim of the rock-walled slash.

The way they rode, tense and alert, with hands hovering close to their holsters, marked them for Buck Barton's eyes. The sight of the big man who forked the rangy roan at the head of the column sent an electric tingle up and down Buck's spine. He had never seen Slash Gratton, but there could be no mistaking that thick body, that shaggy head, the swing of ruthless arrogance in his carriage.

BUCK BARTON gathered up his reins with gloved left hand. His gaze swept the path that he had chosen to bring him unseen to the east end of the canyon. But even as he looked, a single rider detached himself from the file, and circled west to round the other vent of the canyon. Buck's eyes followed the lone rider.

"Settin' a lookout. Hadn't figured on that. Kind of—" A faint smile flicked his lips, as he eyed the single rider edging up his side of the canyon.

"A dude," he muttered as he took in the details—a slim, wiry man, forking a slender-bodied, long-legged black. A horse built for speed instead of staying power—a man to match. Buck Barton's lip curled as he saw the flapping white Stetson, the trim-fitting yellow slicker, caught the flash of silver at spur and bridle.

"A dude," he grunted again. "Rangy for a quick getaway, just like his horse. But likely to curl up plenty quick with a gun in his ribs."

For a moment Buck Barton sat his saddle, motionless. Then he nodded, and a smile without humor played across his face. The idea that had flashed across his mind seemed to wipe out the uncertainties of a moment ago. Things might work out—if his luck held with him.

He settled his boots in the stirrups, tightened his reins. But he did not move for another three minutes—not until the last of Slash Gratton's outfit had disappeared in the black canyon—until the lone rider was out of sight behind a jagged upthrust rock near the rim.

When the rider did not reappear, Buck Barton eased his horse from beneath the overhang. The rain beat down, and the

animal snorted and sidestepped. Barton quieted it with a low word, urged it forward. It was a grim chance he was taking, but old Tom Durham's deputies were used to taking chances.

Slowly, reining his horse carefully around pools of water in which hoofs might splash, past smooth rocks on which iron shoes might click, he edged closer to the rock which sheltered the lookout. Now faintly through the fog-drenched air, he caught the creak of steel-shod wheels on the rocky trail—made out the lumbering old Concord stage dropping down the west slope to the mouth of the canyon.

"Showdown due right sudden!" His tight lips formed the words without sound. "Hope ol' Cimarron Thompson has got sense enough to grab for the clouds when they jump him."

Then from the upthrust rock, still twenty yards away, a shrill whistle sounded. Buck Barton's jaw tightened. He leaned forward across his saddle horn, urging his horse to a swifter pace. The lone rider wouldn't be listening for sounds from behind. His whole attention would be upon the canyon below.

Buck Barton pulled up with only the rock between himself and the lookout. Twenty feet beyond was the rim of the canyon. Down below were the road-agents. Buck Barton caught himself wishing that Simms and Lassiter were siding him. There'd be no lurking behind cover—no play-acting—nothing but hot lead and sudden death. Then his eyes went bleak. Sudden death! That's what Simms and Lassiter had found, here in these hills. Below was the man who had brought it to them.

His jaws set and his young face hardened. He touched his horse with star rowels, neckreined it to circle the rock. But he set himself back in the stirrups and dragged his horse to a stop before it thrust its nose beyond the rock. A sharp breath—then a soundless curse.

"A posse followin' the stage! Hell of a time for the sheriff to horn in!"

Now the lookout had caught what was hidden from the outlaws below—a file of silent riders drifting out of the fog along the Cobalt trail, and heading down into the canyon. A shrill whistle—a trembling, ear-splitting sound that held a note of fear. It echoed back and forth across the canyon.

A moment of breathless silence. Then the pound of hoofs from the depths of the slash—a wild yell from the posse, as it charged down the steep trail. Shouted curses from Slash Gratton's outfit—the sullen bellow of six-guns—the sharp, strangled scream of a stricken man. And all in the space of a dozen heartbeats.

Then Buck Barton jerked back to his own problem. He hadn't expected the posse to show up. Tom Durham hadn't taken Sheriff Wright into his confidence, for every resident of Cobalt was under a cloud that could not be dispelled until Slash Gratton and his outfit had been rubbed out—until his confederates in the town were smoked into the open. But somehow news that the stage carried bullion must have reached the sheriff's ears.

Even as he moved with swift coordination of mind and muscle, it came to Buck Barton that Sheriff Wright must be on the square, or he'd never be out ramrodding a posse when Slash Gratton was likely to be on the prowl. No time to ponder that now, though. Just one thing to do—and the chances hardly even that he could pull it.

HIS gloved hand tightened on the reins. His bare right snatched the six-gun from its holster. He leaned forward and rammed his rowels deep. His horse leaped past the rock—whirled on its hind heels as Buck Barton surged back on the reins. The slim rider was already on the run, narrow slickered back bent, silver spurs raking the long-legged black.

Buck Barton's six-gun swept up—but he could not squeeze the trigger. The lone rider was an outlaw—the lookout for Slash Gratton's outfit—probably a killer in his own right. But his back was toward the deputy. With a muttered curse, Buck Barton slammed the six-gun back in its holster. Now he fumbled with the coil of rope at the cantle. He whipped out a loop, even as he raked his horse into a furious burst of speed.

In a dozen flashing leaps, Buck Barton's roan cut down the distance to less than twenty yards. But the deputy knew that it was only a matter of seconds before the speedy black would regain that lead. The rope whistled around his head. The loop darted out. It dropped around the slim shoulders. Buck Barton braced himself in the stirrups, as he pulled the roan to a sliding stop.

A startled scream came from the lips of the lone rider as he left his saddle. The startled black lunged ahead—was a dozen

yards down the rim of the canyon by the time its rider crashed to the rocks. Buck Barton leaped from his saddle before his animal had fairly stopped. Now he was racing toward the huddled form, six-gun swinging in his fist.

The roar of guns, the wild, high yells and curses still came from down in the canyon. But the slim outlaw was silent and motionless there on the rim, pelting rain drenching the thin, white face. Buck Barton halted, standing wide-legged above the slender form.

Then a puzzled expression swept his face for an instant. Just for a moment he forgot the outlaw outfit and the grim posse down below. His slate-gray eyes narrowed. He shook his head as if dismissing some crazy thought.

"It can't be! It's just a pasty-faced dude—"

Swiftly he hunkered beside the still form. His eyes swept it from the toes of soft kidskin boots to the crown of the white Stetson. Then his hand darted out and twitched the hat from the outlaw's head. He rocked back on his heels as if he had been clubbed.

"A girl! A slim, black-haired girl—ridin' lookout for Slash Gratton's outfit!"

Then the bleak look returned. His lips writhed in a sneer. If he had forgotten before, the sound of receding hoofs and the dimming crack of six-guns reminded him.

"If she's ridin' with Slash Gratton, she's no better than he is!" Then almost as an afterthought, "Easier to handle than a man, though."

He straightened and swept a swift glance out across the canyon. He caught a glimpse of a single rider, just disappearing in the fog—heard the pound of hoofs down in the canyon again. He knew that Gratton was gone, and that the posse milled uncertainly below. He stooped and lifted the slender form. He heaved it across his saddle and swung up behind. He neckreined his roan around, heading back into the fastness of the hills.

CHAPTER II

OUTLAW'S WOMAN

BUCK BARTON slumped deep in the willow and rawhide chair in front of the crude stone fireplace in the little hidden cabin. His long legs were thrust out toward the crackling blaze. His moody gray eyes studied the steam from his drying boots. But at increasing intervals his gaze strayed to the slender form that stretched on the blanket just inside the circle of heat.

The girl, still wrapped in her yellow slicker, was breathing evenly now. Signs of returning consciousness were beginning to show. The faint flush was coming back to her cheeks—and Buck Barton noticed that her hair, almost dry now, was black and wavy. He studied her face, with its finely chiseled features, with grudging admiration. He caught himself wondering at the color of her eyes behind the still closed lids. His lips twisted bitterly.

"She's an outlaw—one of Slash Gratton's long-riders," he told himself for the hundredth time. "No better than the rest, in spite of her pretty face. An' I'll give her no more consideration."

The girl's lips were moving now. Mumbled words came faintly. Buck Barton straightened in his chair, leaned forward toward her. Maybe she might mutter something important before her senses returned fully. But now her eyes popped open. Buck Barton sucked in his breath at the startled terror in their brown depths. Just like a cornered deer's, he thought—and cursed himself for thinking.

The girl pushed herself to a sitting position—and her face whitened and twisted with the agony of moving. She caught her lips between white teeth to hold back the cry of pain. Buck Barton stood over her, a grim smile on his lips.

She turned her eyes up to him, slowly—fearfully. "Who—who—"

"You wouldn't know if I told you. But if you're hopin' I'm one of Slash Gratton's outfit, you're mistaken."

"Then—then you're from Sheriff Wright's—"

Buck Barton shook his head. "Don't know him. I'm just an hombre who's honin' to hear you talk."

The girl seemed to pull herself together. She rose shakily, to drop into the chair Buck had vacated. "What shall I talk about?" Her voice was low and expressionless now.

"Oh, stage stickups, maybe—killin's—yeah, an' about your outfit that run out on you when the posse showed up."

The girl looked at him out of deep brown eyes, shadowed by long black lashes. Then

her gaze dropped to the crackling blaze in the fireplace. She shivered.

"I could talk—so much better—if I weren't wet—and cold."

"All right, sister. I'll find you somethin' dry. But you can't be too particular about the fit." Buck Barton turned to the door leading into the lean-to.

The girl watched him disappear. Her eyes slowly circled the gloomy room—to the big padlock on the door—to the narrow barred windows. She shook her head ever so slightly, and stared into the fire again. She still sat there, a slender, shivering figure, when Buck Barton returned.

He stood in the doorway a moment, eyes upon her. His narrow-lidded gaze took in every detail. In spite of himself, the look of her sitting there so pathetically did something to his heart. He sneered at his own softness. He strode to her with a pair of faded Levis, a cotton shirt and a blanket over his arm.

"Change here, while I put up my horse." Then his teeth bared in a wintry smile. "Reckon you've already decided you can't make a gateaway tonight. Even if you could get out of the cabin, you'd lose yourself in the hills. It'll be plumb dark in a half hour."

She still huddled forlornly in front of the fireplace when he returned. Buck Barton watched her silently for a moment before she knew he was back. He suddenly felt a distaste for what he knew he must do. But he forced himself to forget her white face, her hopeless, frightened eyes. After all, she was a long-rider—a member of Slash Gratton's outfit.

He dropped an armful of wood on the slab floor. Then he knelt in front of the fireplace to replenish the dying blaze. Still kneeling, he turned toward her. His face was granite hard, and his slate-gray eyes bored into her brown ones. His teeth were bared in a set grin.

"Now about the stickup, sister—an' about the outfit that run out on you when the goin' got tough."

SHE shuddered, and shook her head. "You've got me wrong. It wasn't my outfit. I—I just happened to be on the canyon rim."

Buck Barton's voice was raspy and hard. She was lying—lying desperately and none too expertly. "Yeah?" he grunted. "I watched you—saw you leave the outfit an' head for the rim. Watched you until you got set. Heard you whistle your warnin' to the outfit below when the posse showed up. Your story don't hang together—none. Ridin' the high country in the rain?" His voice was sarcastic. "Twenty miles from Cobalt—an' ten from the nearest spread? It don't wash, sister!"

"It's—it's the truth! My name is Jean Ralston. I live at the Anchor spread—my father's place. I—I often ride in the rain."

Buck Barton's set grin widened. It pleased him to humor her attempts at misleading him further. "The Anchor spread, huh? Name of Ralston? Just as well save your breath, sister. You was actin' as lookout for that long-rider outfit that was plannin' to stick up the stage."

"How do you—I tell you, I never saw them before!"

The grin faded from Buck Barton's face now. He leaned forward, staring straight into her eyes. "No use lyin' any more, sister! I just told you I watched you. Yeah—an' I dropped you with my rope when you run for it. I brought you here."

The girl was silent for a breathless moment. Then the color came back in a measure to her cheeks—a tiny flame flickered deep in her brown eyes. A faint ghost of a smile played across her lips.

"You—brought—me here? You were sure that I was a lookout for an outlaw outfit—yet you didn't turn me over to the sheriff? Is—is it possible that you do not care to face the law—either?"

Buck Barton drew a long laugh and heaved to his feet. A chuckle rumbled deep in his throat. "Check, sister! You ain't so dumb, after all. I've been wonderin' when you'd get the drift. You're more'n part right—but you ain't got it all yet."

"You mean—"

"I figured your outfit didn't set much store by you, the minute I saw 'em hightail it, leavin' you flat. The idea come to me then. A dang pretty girl—an' she's been done dirty. She won't be feelin' none too good toward that long-rider outfit. Likely glad of a chance to even things up with 'em. That's the idea I got."

The girl blinked. "Even things up?"

Buck Barton nodded. "Yeah. I tell myself that mebbe that girl an' me can kind o' hook up. She can tell me where they hole up—where they cache their swag. Me, I can lift it off 'em—an' the split would keep us plenty soft for a long spell."

For a little while the slender girl was silent, her brown eyes holding steadily upon the man. Buck Barton could fairly feel their gaze probing his brain, and was more than a little uncomfortable under it. But the twisted grin did not leave his lips. At last she spoke.

"I never saw you until I woke up in this cabin. I don't even know your name. How do I know you're not a law-man, trying to trick me?"

Buck Barton's slate-gray eyes narrowed ever so slightly. Now it was his turn to study the girl. In spite of what he had seen, he more than half hoped that she would be indignant at his offer—would scream—or cry—or whatever a girl who has just been insulted does. But she returned his gaze defiantly. He forced harshness into his voice.

"Check again, sister. The name is Buck Barton—and here is my card."

His brown hand darted to the pocket of his flannel shirt—drew out a folded sheet of paper. He handed it to the girl, and she straightened it slowly. Buck caught the swiftly-drawn breath as she looked at the picture, and read the printing beneath. She folded the sheet just as slowly, and handed it back.

"I lifted it from the wall of the jail, down Araviso way," he said softly. "While the sheriff was out in the hills—huntin' the Tomichi Kid."

Jean Ralston bit her lip as she studied his face. It was not a face cut from pattern—with its high cheek-bones, wide-spaced slate-gray eyes with the sun wrinkles at their corners. Dark hair dipped down on the forehead in a peak. The mouth was generous but thin-lipped, and the chin square and rugged. At last she nodded, and Buck Barton caught what he thought was a strange hurt look in her eyes.

"Buck Barton—alias the Tomichi Kid! Wanted in Arizona for rustling and murder. Five thousand dollars on your head."

"Buck Barton—that's me!"

The girl drew a shaky breath. "Jean Ralston is my real name, too. And my father did run the Anchor spread. But dad—is—dead. And the Anchor is fifty miles northeast."

"Now we're gettin' somewhere. Yore dad died—an' you hooked up with that outlaw outfit." He leaned closer, his lips twisted bitterly. "Mebbe there's some man in the outfit, huh? Some man you set a great store by?"

JEAN RALSTON nodded dumbly. Bitter anger welled up in Buck Barton's heart. Anger that he could not explain—anger at himself for letting that make any difference—anger at the girl for admitting the charge. Why should he care that this girl loved one of Slash Gratton's killers, anyway? She had offered him a chance that he had hardly dared hope for. He would use it, no matter what the outcome would be for her.

"You'd like to go back to that man, huh?"

"As long as he is with Slash Gratton, I—I must stay with him." The girl's voice broke and tears filled her brown eyes.

A sneer spread across Buck Barton's face—a sneer to mask what otherwise might show. His hands clenched into tight fists at his sides. "Yeah? You want to go back—but there's only one way you'll ever make it, sister!"

"I'll—I'll do anything—anything! But I've got to get back to him. Tell me—please tell me what you want."

"Just one thing, sister. The trail to Slash Gratton's hideout—an' twelve hours to follow it."

"You're—you're going to join him?"

"What do you think?"

"But—but you can't do that!"

Buck Barton blinked—then shook his head. His ears must have tricked him. The girl was thinking of the man she had left behind—not him. That was what had caused the break in her voice.

"I can't, huh? Know any good reason why?"

"Slash Gratton would turn you in for the reward. He has killed men for less. He'd shoot you down before you ever reached his hideout."

Buck Barton nodded. "I see. An' in that case—Say, you don't mean you wouldn't like to see me stop a slug?"

A faint flush crossed Jean Ralston's oval face. She dropped her head, and her voice was low. Buck Barton leaned forward to catch the words.

"I—I wouldn't like to see even a coyote killed."

"Tryin' to make me think you're soft, huh?" Buck Barton growled deep in his throat. "I'll take my chances against Slash

Gratton's guns. I'm waitin' for you to give me the directions."

"I—I don't know the trail. I've been with the outfit only a little while. It's somewhere off in the hills—" She waved her hand aimlessly.

Buck Barton thrust his chin out. His voice was hard. "That's fine! Off there somewheres! If that's all you know, I'm plumb sorry I didn't leave you for the sheriff." Then his eyes narrowed. "Say—mebbe there's a reward for you, huh? Reckon the sheriff'd be willin' to pay off, if I brought you in."

"No! No!" Her voice was thin and high-pitched. "I—I can help you. I don't know the way to Slash Gratton's hideout. But I can name a man who does."

"That's better, sister!" Buck drew a long breath. "Who is he?"

"I'm—I'm afraid—I don't—"

"Talk fast!" Buck's voice was a growl that drained the color from her face.

"He's the man who disposes of Slash Gratton's loot—tips him off when there's a chance for a cleanup."

Buck grinned crookedly. "You think this hombre would double-cross Gratton, huh?"

"Link Freeman would sell his soul for money. Gratton gives him only a little part—and Freeman would jump at the chance for more."

"Link Freeman!" Buck Barton could not keep the startled tone from his voice.

The girl looked at him queerly, a frown furrowing her brow. "You—you know him?"

Buck Barton shook his head. "Not personal—but by name. Express agent at Cobalt, ain't he?"

"That's his job. But he uses it only to get information for Gratton." Jean Ralston's lips writhed. "He's a worse crook than Slash Gratton himself—and that's plenty bad."

"You don't—somehow like Link Freeman?" Buck asked softly.

"I hate—" She bit her lip. "I—I know him only by reputation."

Buck Barton turned on his heel and strode to the corner where he had pitched his Stetson. He picked it up and jammed it onto his head. Then he took down the slicker from its peg and shrugged his shoulders into it.

"Plenty of grub in the cupboard—water in the spring that comes from under the lean-to. I'll be back in four-five days. I'm countin' on you to stick—if you know when you're well off. Keep close. The sheriff is likely combin' these hills."

"You're—you're going to Cobalt?"

Buck Barton grinned without humor. "I'm makin' a little talk with Link Freeman."

"If you join Slash Gratton's outfit, will you—will you—"

"Yeah? Will I what?"

"Will you—kind of—look after Bob? He's so—so—"

"I'll look after yore man!" There was a half sneer on Buck Barton's lips—a sneer that he tried to stifle. "I'll keep him under my wing—see that he don't get hurt."

As he edged through the door, the girl's voice followed. "Thank you, Buck Barton. I'll be—thinking of you."

CHAPTER III

FIVE-THOUSAND-DOLLAR DEAL

DUSK was changing to purple darkness, when Buck Barton rode out of the southwest to the drab little town of Cobalt. He pulled to a halt on the rim of the abrupt down-slope which almost overhung the closely-bunched cluster of buildings. Already lights were flickering up redly down there below. A half-dozen or so saddled horses stood in front of one building—a buckboard at the hitchrail a little farther down the single street. No more movement than normal—no excitement.

He urged his horse down the steep trail, to pull up again at the head of the street. Again he swept the town with narrow-lidded gaze. His eyes held for a moment upon the string of horses in front of the only two-story building in Cobalt. He knew that only the longest bar in town could draw so many riders.

He licked his dry lips. Then he shook his head, and swept the rest of the street. His gaze held for just a second on the buckboard a little way down. A half smile crossed his lips. Some old man—or a woman—from one of the surrounding spreads, come to town for provisions. Nothing to worry about from that quarter.

He looked still further, a question in his eyes. Then his gaze came to a stop on a little building, halfway between the huge, rickety livery stable and the saloon. A

ruddy light came from the single front window.

"Either the sheriff's office or the express company," he grunted. "Got to take a chance." He urged his horse down the muddy street.

He edged far to the left side—shrugged his shoulders deeper into his slicker. His darting eyes read the sign as he neared the saloon. "Perro Amarillo"—the Yellow Dog. Coarse laughter, and the sound of a tinpanny piano came from the ramshackle building.

Buck Barton passed it. Passed the New York Emporium, too, where the buckboard stood. He could catch movement inside, but could not make out faces or figures. Now he neared the little building. The twisted grin came back to his lips, as he saw the swinging sign that proclaimed it the express and stage office.

He swung to the ground. He dropped the reins at the roan's feet. Then he ducked out of the slicker and hung it behind the saddle. He tested his six-gun to see that it slipped easily. Silently, cautiously he slipped across the twenty yards of street, to bring up against the blank side of the little office.

He stood there, ear to the wall for a moment. No sound came from inside. With redoubled caution, he edged around the corner to the lighted window. Standing back where he could not be seen from inside, his eyes swept as much of the room as came within range of his vision—enough to see a single man.

He shook his head. Maybe there was another inside—he couldn't tell. One of the things he'd have to chance. He tiptoed to the door and laid his ear against it. Not a sound reached him. His right hand hovered over the butt of the gun, as his left lifted the latch and swung the door wide.

He took a short step inside the room. His eyes blinked in the red light for a moment. Then his grin widened, as he saw the startled expression on the face of the man hunched over a scarred desk. It was a narrow face, with glittering little eyes and a bulbous nose. Buck Barton kicked the door shut with his heel, never taking his eyes from the man.

Now he took another and longer step. The man at the desk—incredibly thin—unkinked his back—half rose from his chair. His trembling lips formed raspy words.

"Who—who are you? What d'you want?"

When Buck Barton did not answer—just took another step forward, hand caressing the butt of his six-gun with unmistakable meaning—Link Freeman seemed to realize suddenly that it wasn't the time for questions. Slowly his hands went above his head.

"If—if it's a stickup, you're wastin' yore time. There ain't more'n—ten dollars in the office."

Buck Barton edged up to the desk now, slate-gray eyes boring into Link Freeman's. He pulled out a chair with the toe of his boot—dropped into it, drawing his gun from its holster and laying it on the desk in front of him. His hand still hovered over it.

"I ain't interested in what little cash you might have," he said softly. "I'm here to make a deal with you—if you talk sense."

"A—a deal with me?" Link Freeman's eyes widened.

Buck Barton leaned forward, talking slowly, softly. "Yeah—a deal. I'm honin' to know the trail to Slash Gratton's hideout."

"Slash Gratton's—hideout? But what makes you think I—I—"

BUCK BARTON'S lips smiled, but his eyes were hard and bright. "Cut the sparrin', Freeman. You're Gratton's tip-off man. I'm willin' to pay you higher than he does."

Link Freeman jerked back as if he had been clipped. "Why—I'm not—I don't—"

"I said to stop the jaw-waggin'," Buck snapped. "Mebbe you can fool Cobalt—but not me. I aim to lift Slash Gratton's cache—an' I'm willin' to pay a fourth of it for the trail to his hideout."

Buck Barton could read the growing greed in Freeman's glittering little eyes. He could see the Adam's apple chase itself up and down the skinny neck. Then Freeman leaned toward Buck, his voice hardly more than a squeaky whisper.

"S'pose I do know—s'pose I might sell the information. How do I know you ain't a law-man, tryin' to trick me? Mind, I'm only s'posin'."

One corner of Buck Barton's mouth smiled. His left hand went to his shirt pocket and pulled out the folded paper. Link Freeman studied it, eyes darting from the circular to Buck's face. Buck Barton

sat there tense and grim. This was the first test.

"The Tomichi Kid? I've heard of him. This here picture looks a heap like you. Reckon you're him, right enough."

Freeman's freckled hands came down slowly until they lay flat on the desk. Buck Barton drew a long breath. If Freeman had seen the Tomichi Kid lately—maybe if he had ever seen him—the difference might have been noticeable enough to have caused a doubt to creep into the skinny man's mind.

Link Freeman's eyes met Buck Barton's bleak ones now. "I—I could sell you to the sheriff for five thousand dollars—the reward named on this here—"

Buck Barton's bronzed right hand gripped the butt of his six-gun suggestively. "If you lived to reach the sheriff's office!"

Link Freeman's eyes wavered. He forced a grin. "But I ain't in that kind of business. For that matter, I could collect half that much for Slash Gratton's hide."

"But you will point out the trail to Gratton's hideout!" Buck Barton's words were more a statement than a question.

Link Freeman appeared to study for a moment. Then he nodded slowly. "I'm ready to tell—for one fourth of what you lift from him. But mind you, if he bests you, it's yore word against mine. I'll swear you forced it out of me at the p'int of a six-gun."

A wintry smile flicked Buck's lips. "It won't never be necessary, Freeman. But now the trail. I ain't got much time to waste."

"The cut wouldn't be much right now. You'd ought to wait—"

"What d'you mean—not much?"

"Pickin's have been right slim for a couple of months. Gratton ain't got over a thousand in cash. But a couple of shipments of dust are due in the next few days, from the Lucky Dagger diggin's. When Slash Gratton gets them strongboxes, it'll be worth liftin'."

Buck Barton's eyes narrowed—held steadily and unblinkingly upon Link Freeman's. "Still thinkin' about that five thousand on my scalp—an' how to collect it, huh?"

Link Freeman shook his head emphatically. "What's five thousand, stacked up against the gold that'll be comin' down from the high country? I'm talkin' straight, feller!"

Then his little eyes narrowed, and a faint smile played across his lips. "I'll work you into Slash Gratton's outfit, Tomichi! I'll send a letter to him. That'll give you plenty of time an' opportunity to spot his cache—time to plan how to get it."

Buck Barton drew a long breath. His forehead furrowed in a frown as his eyes held Freeman's. At last he nodded. "Mebbe not such a bad idea, Freeman. You think yore note'll do any good?"

"Slash Gratton'll take my word for it. I ain't never tricked him yet," he said confidently. "Gratton'll be glad to sign you up."

"Don't know as I need any vouchin' for," Buck Barton grunted. "That 'wanted' circular is as good as any note you can write."

Link Freeman's jaws set, and Buck could see that the man was steeling himself for something. Then he spoke slowly. "I'm keepin' that circular, Tomichi—just as a matter of protection. In case you double-cross me, the sheriff'll get it—an' I'll collect five thousand."

Buck Barton's six-gun snapped up. Freeman's face paled, but his jaws did not relax or his mouth sag. "You can drill me, hombre. But that won't get you to Slash Gratton's hideout. I'm holdin' the top card there."

SLOWLY the furrows ironed out of Buck Barton's brow—the glare left his slate-gray eyes. "Check, feller. You can keep the circular. But I'm promisin' you that if you try to use it, I'll be back and fill yore carcass full of lead."

"Play square with me—an' I'll play square with you."

"You'd better, Freeman! An' now that note to Gratton."

Link Freeman uncoiled his long thin body and shuffled to the little iron safe. He twirled the dials, and the door swung open. He thrust the circular into a pigeonhole and clanged the door shut. Back at his desk, he scribbled a note and signed it. Then he drew a crude map on a sheet of paper and handed it to Buck Barton.

"The map points out the trail to Gratton's hideout. I'm trustin' you to destroy it before you get there. Likely you'll meet some of Slash's men on the trail. Don't drag yore guns an' you'll be safe. Good luck—an' I'll be waitin' for the cleanup."

Buck Barton's crooked grin came again.

"It'll come, hombre—it'll come, right enough."

He backed out of the door, six-gun still in hand. He shot a glance back over his shoulder—caught a queer glint in Link Freeman's little eyes, a half smile on the man's lips. For a moment he was minded to turn and ask Freeman the meaning of that look. But almost instantly he put it from his mind. After all, there was nothing he could do but count on the express agent's greed and fear for a little while.

But even after Buck Barton had mounted his roan and headed out of Cobalt, he pulled to a stop at the edge of town and swept the street again with close scrutiny. He didn't catch sight of Link Freeman's lathlike figure darting from the little office and making for the livery stable, because Freeman took particular care that his visitor could not see him. At last Buck Barton shook his head uncertainly, and straightened in his saddle.

Now that his meeting with Link Freeman was over, he more than a little doubted the wisdom of his plan. It had seemed like a first-class idea when he mapped it out at first.. He was even almost certain that he had carried out his deception with the skinny man. But those were only the very lowest hurdles. He'd have to watch his step mighty close, for any misstep would mean a bullet in his back.

CHAPTER IV

A TELLTALE KISS

BUCK BARTON did not take the trail marked on the map, as he rode out of Cobalt. Instead, he headed back for the little cabin where he had left the slender, brown-eyed girl. He tried to tell himself that this side trip was just to make sure that she had not run out on him—that she hadn't headed for Slash Gratton's hideout with word of what he planned.

But deep in his heart he knew better. He was angry and disturbed that he had not been able to erase Jean Ralston's piquant face, red lips and soft brown eyes from his mind. He was a lone wolf, and glorified in it. That was why it was so irritating to have that outlaw's woman always before his eyes.

He found himself urging the roan to a faster gait as he neared the slope of shingle. He caught himself inventing ways of getting the girl out of the outlaw outfit—of persuading her that disaster most certainly lay ahead, unless she quit Slash Gratton's rustler pack. His lips twisted in a sneer directed at himself. He pulled his horse to a halt, determined to head straight for Gratton's hideout.

Then he drew a long breath. There was an excuse for going on that held water. "I'd better tell her what happened—what I'm figurin' on doin'. If I don't, she'll shore run out on me."

A faint light flickered through the narrow window, as Buck Barton pulled his roan to a halt at the edge of the clearing. For a full three minutes he sat there, silent and motionless. Once he thought he caught the shadow of someone moving between the lamp and the window, but it was all so fast that he could not be sure. And it was not repeated.

He urged his horse across the clearing to the single hitching post beside the porch. He swung down, and stepped onto the narrow slab porch. He hesitated a second—then rapped sharply on the door. For a full minute there was no answer. He thought he caught a faint sound like the soft closing of a door, but was not sure. His hand stole to his six-gun butt, as his knuckles beat a louder and more insistent tatto.

At last he caught the pad of feet inside. A low voice called. "Who is it?"

He answered. Another breathless minute passed, before the bar grated. The door opened a crack. Jean Ralston's oval face with its wide brown eyes appeared, pale and drawn in the light of the oil lamp. Buck Barton pushed the door wide with his foot, and stepped inside. With right hand still resting on the butt of his guns, his eyes swept the little room.

There was no one inside except he and Jean Ralston—no place another could hide. The door to the lean-to was closed and the bar in place. He drew a long breath of relief. But almost immediately he stiffened. He sniffed the air, and his eyes narrowed dangerously.

The girl drew a sharp breath, and her face paled still more. Her hand flew to her lips as if to choke back a cry. The puzzled look was still on his face, as Buck Barton whirled toward her.

"Somebody's been smokin' in this room. A Bull Durham quirley! Who?"

"Somebody—smoking? You mean—you can—smell—"

Dangerous lights flickered in Buck Barton's slate-gray eyes now. His hand caressed the butt of his six-gun monotonously. He took a step toward the girl, and his voice was deceptively soft and even.

"If you've been double-crossin' me, Sister—if there's been a man here in the last few—"

"No, Buck Barton! No!" The words fairly tumbled from Jean Ralston's lips. "I—I smoked a quirley—truly I did! Just to—to see why men like to smoke so well! I've wanted to for a long time—but until now—"

Buck Barton took a quick step toward her. He grasped her shoulder with his left hand—swung her toward him. He stooped swiftly and kissed her squarely upon the lips. Fiery wrath blazed in her brown eyes. She stepped back and slapped him a stinging blow on the cheek.

"You—you—"

"Check, sister! I kissed you—but not because I enjoyed it. Quickest way to find out if you was lyin' to me. You were lyin'! There's no taste of tobacco on your lips. You didn't smoke—but someone did. Someone from Slash Gratton's outfit. You're plannin' on framin' me, sister—but it won't work! I'm waitin' to hear you talk—an' it better be good!"

"I swear I haven't seen or heard of Slash Gratton since—since you brought me to this cabin!" Jean Ralston said shakily.

BUCK BARTON growled deep in his throat. He whirled and made for the door of the lean-to. He lifted the latch and swung the door wide, stepping back and snatching his six-gun from its holster. But there was no sound or movement from back in the little room. He slammed the door shut and turned to the main room again. His face was hard and stern.

"Someone was here! Couldn't have been anyone except from Slash Gratton's outfit. You're cookin' up some sort of deal—plannin' on collectin' the five thousand that's on my head. But you can't put it across." He patted the pocket where Link Freeman's letter reposed. "Me, I'm joinin' up with Slash Gratton, as soon as I can reach his hideout."

Jean Ralston's eyes went wide, and her face paled. "You're—you're joining him? For good?"

"Yeah. Figure I can make more joinin' than by liftin' his cache. Kind o' like the idea."

"If—if you do that—you're leaving me in a worse spot—than—than you found me! You can't, Buck Barton! You—"

Buck Barton grinned crookedly. "I ain't leavin' you in no spot, sister. I done promised to take care of you, an' I don't never go back on my word. You're goin' with me to the hideout."

"No! You can't do that, Buck! You don't know—"

"I know, right enough. That wouldn't fit in with yore plans. Listen, sister—that's the reason you're goin' with me."

"But you don't understand, Buck Barton. The only reason I was with Slash Gratton was on account of Bob! I—I couldn't leave him there with the outlaw outfit alone. He might have—"

Buck's wry grin widened. "Then mebbe you want me to send yore man here to you, huh? Want me to tell Gratton I don't like the looks of his face. Might be a good idea, at that. This here is a man's game—an' yore Bob ain't a man, or he wouldn't be tied to yore apron strings."

Buck Barton caught her sharply drawn breath, the sudden widening of her eyes. But he was not prepared for her next words. "If you could only do that, Buck! If you could make Slash Gratton see that it's no place for Bob! I—I do want him away from that outfit." Then her voice died to a whisper. "But—you can't—Buck. It's too—dangerous—too deadly dangerous—"

Buck Barton's heart skipped a beat. For just a second he thought he read something in her words—her voice. Something that made him forget all that had gone before. But her next words dispelled the illusion.

"You don't know how dangerous, Buck. You'll get killed—and then I'll never get Bob free of Slash Gratton. And as long as Bob is with him, he thinks he has some hold on—on—"

Slowly the meaning dawned on Buck Barton. He nodded. "So—that's the way—the land lays, huh? Slash Gratton wants you for his woman—wants to take you away from yore Bob. Is that it?"

The girl nodded dumbly. "He knows that as long as Bob is with him, I'll not run away. But I'll die before I—I marry Slash Gratton!"

Buck Barton growled. "Don't worry

about that, sister! You may be an outlaw's woman—but you're a woman anyhow. I'll take care of that end of the deal. You ain't marryin' nobody you don't want to."

Then he stepped closer and looked into her eyes. In spite of his distrust, he thought he read fear there—and strangely, not fear for herself. But he steeled himself for the next question.

"It was someone from Slash Gratton's outfit here tonight, sister! No use lyin'! Who was it?"

She shook her head emphatically. "I—I can't tell you, Buck! Honestly I can't! But I swear it was not one of Gratton's pack. And I swear that it was nothing for you to fear."

He shrugged his shoulders. "All right, check it, sister! You win. I'll be headin' for Slash Gratton's hideout. You can stay here—though I'm a damn fool for lettin' you outtalk me. I'll send yore Bob to you."

Twice Jean Ralston opened her mouth before the words came. She seemed to be fighting with herself. When she did speak at last, her voice was thin and reedy. "Don't go, Buck! Please don't! You don't know what you're running into. You'll get killed—and it will be on my conscience. Forget about me, Buck—forget about Bob. Leave the Sagauches as fast as you can ride."

Buck Barton laughed shortly. "I've been lookin' down the throat of danger for as long as I can remember—an' I like it. You're holdin' out on me—you know somethin' you ain't tellin'. But it makes no difference. I'm ridin' into the hills."

"Nothing I can say will make you change your mind?"

Buck Barton shook his head. "Nothing, sister. But you can promise somethin' that'll make my conscience a little clearer. You can promise that you an' yore man will head north—an' keep a-goin'—when I send him to you."

THE slender girl's face softened, and a strange look crept into her eyes. Her lips parted as if she would tell him something. But she shook her head, and did not speak for a full dozen seconds.

"All right, Buck Barton. Bob and I will ride north—to the Anchor spread. If—if you ever leave Slash Gratton's outfit—without—without—"

A twisted grin crossed the man's lips. "I ride north quite frequent. I'll look you up—if things turn out right."

"And you'll promise to be careful—to watch Slash Gratton, and not believe any of the promises he makes?"

"Me, I always keep my eyes open. An' I trust nobody—nobody!"

"And if the sheriff—"

Buck Barton laughed harshly. "I never looked through the bars from the inside yet!"

He whirled toward the door now, pulling his Stetson down over his eyes and tightening his slicker around him. The slender girl watched him, her wide eyes filled with pain. For a full five minutes after he slammed the door behind him—even after she heard the plop of hoofs in the soft, wet ground—she stood there in the circle of lamplight, eyes misty and lips parted.

Then she turned and stepped shakily to the chair in front of the crude fireplace. Her shoulders sank wearily as she cupped her chin in her hands. After ten minutes or more, she rose and made for the door in answer to a soft knock.

As she opened it cautiously, a squat man stepped inside. His darting eyes swept the little room with swift scrutiny. Then his rather slack lips twisted into a grin without humor.

"Reckon he's gone for good this time, huh? No danger of his comin' in onto us again? I ain't honin' to swap lead with the Tomichi Kid."

"He's gone," the girl said wearily as she turned back to her chair.

"Then we can finish what we started," the man said, slumping into a willow-seated chair facing her.

Jean Ralston shook her head. "I—don't—know—"

"It's the Tomichi Kid against Bob," the man growled. "Bob's worth a thousand—an' the Kid five thousand. But one is better than none."

"But how do I know that you'll let Bob—"

"I'll give you writin' to that effect," the squat man grunted. "If you think my word ain't—"

"It's not that—but if Sheriff Wright—"

"I'll fix it with him—I promise you that!"

Jean Ralston nodded dumbly. "All right—I'll talk. What do you—want to know?"

"Where did the Tomichi Kid go? Does

he really plan on joining up with Slash Gratton? Or is he aiming on double-crossin' Link Freeman—liftin' Gratton's cache an' runnin' out?"

"He's headed for Gratton's hideout. He intends to join the outfit. He thinks he can clean up more that way than by stealing Gratton's cache."

"He's takin' the trail Freeman mapped out? He don't know the short-cut?"

"I told him nothing. The only trail he knows is the one Freeman gave him."

The man grinned, rose and stretched his arms. "If you've steered me right, the deal is closed. I'll snake Bob out of his trouble an' send him to you—here."

When this second man was gone, Jean Ralston made her way blindly to her chair and slumped into it. For a full hour she sat there, hardly moving. Her brown eyes were stricken and her lips twisted as if in pain. If ever there was a time she needed advice—real help—now was the time. But there was no one to give it to her. She had talked with the Tomichi Kid, an outlaw with a price on his head—and another. And of the two, her instincts told her the Tomichi Kid was the most trustworthy.

If she had not known just what the Tomichi Kid was up against, what little chance he had against Slash Gratton, she would never have made this last deal. Even then, the moment the squat man was gone, she regretted having given him the information. At last she rose and moved toward the lean-to. There was just one more chance—a desperate one—but she would take it.

CHAPTER V

RUSTLERS' ROOST

WHEN Buck Barton prodded his roan into the high country trail, when the single light of the little cabin faded into the darkness, his mind was a whirl of conflicting thoughts. He had always traveled alone—always thought petticoats had no place in his scheme of things. He had always considered himself hard-headed and practical. But now he did not try to delude himself. He had fallen—hard—for a slender, brown-eyed girl.

"Me—twenty-three years old! Figurin' I'm plenty tough. Seen hundreds of women. Know what double-crossin' hell-cats they are. Then I go soft over a she-critter that trails with Slash Gratton's outfit—belongs to one of his road-agents. Plumb locoed—that's what I am!"

But as he plunged deeper into the Sagauche range, he thrust all thoughts of Jean Ralston savagely from his mind. He would need every ounce of alertness and cunning that he possessed to buck Slash Gratton. He knew the outlaw's reputation for ruthlessness and trickery—and he'd have to match it.

Link Freeman's directions were sketchy and the map was not true to detail. But Buck Barton's trail-sense held him to the shortest line. Dusk was dropping down the slopes and filling the valleys with purple, when he pulled to a stop on the crest of a hog-back that overlooked the narrow, canyon-like valley.

Buck Barton sat his saddle, one long leg around the horn, studying and admiring the layout. Slash Gratton had chosen well. There was no clearly defined trail. Even from this point only keen, trail-trained eyes could make out the cluster of low cabins and corrals down in the tree-choked valley.

"No wonder Gratton has lasted so long," Buck grunted. "With a place like this to hole up in, he could stick it out forever."

Now he swung his long leg down, settled his feet in the stirrups, and gathered the reins. The click of hammer-dogs, and a barked order came almost at his elbow.

"Reach high, hombre!"

A faint smile without humor flicked Buck Barton's lips—and was gone. He had been half expecting this for miles—had been wondering why it had not come before. Slowly his hands stretched above his head. He twisted in his saddle and shot a glance back over his shoulder. Two men had stepped from behind a boulder. Two six-guns covered him.

"Hi' you, feller. If you're huntin' dinero, you've come to the wrong place."

"Yeah? Ain't after money. Yore name—an' business—pronto!" The beetling brows of the big hombre drew down over his eyes. The other, a lath-thin, turkey-necked man, nodded emphatically.

"I've been called lots of names," Buck said softly. "Follered lots of trades. Seems like both name an' business are my own—mostly."

The thin man broke in, his voice high-pitched and sharp. "You're takin' in lots of territory, stranger. 'Specially when you're follerin' yore nose in the Sagauche range. Slash Gratton is like to be right interested

in any pilgrim that goes battin' around these here hills."

"Slash Gratton?" Buck Barton's lips quirked in a twisted grin. "That's lucky. Slash Gratton is the hombre I'm most honin' to see. You two workin' with him, huh?"

The bigger of the two grunted an unintelligible answer. He turned to the other. "Snake our horses out of cover. We'll be goin'—the three of us."

The big man headed the procession that dropped down the tree-choked slope into the valley. Buck Barton rode in the center, and the thin man brought up the rear. If Buck was jumpy, he did not show it, as the three riders pulled up at the hitchrail in front of the rambling log house. He swung from his saddle at the big man's gruff order. He stepped onto the porch —to face the huge man with the shaggy head, the gray-green, snaky eyes, and the knife-scared face, who stood in the doorway.

Buck Barton faced that man for a wordless moment. He could feel those lidless eyes boring into him—and the impact was almost physical. He could read the utter cruelty of that low, sloping forehead and wolfish face. He could sense the catamount speed and the immense strength in that huge body. Now he knew why Slash Gratton was so much feared throughout the whole high country.

When Gratton spoke, the softness of his voice and the precision of his words startled Buck Barton. "You're lucky, stranger. You're still alive. We usually plant pilgrims out here in the hills."

"Yeah? Mebbe luck ain't all one-sided, Gratton."

A mirthless smile played across the outlaw's face. "Figure we're lucky, too, huh? Valuing yourself pretty high. Another pilgrim, more or less, means nothing to our string of luck."

"Happen so, I'm not a pilgrim, Gratton. Not many hombres ridin' the high country that could fill my boots. An' none of 'em offerin' to join up with you."

SLASH GRATTON threw back his shaggy head. A raspy, brutal laugh came from his lips. His eyes bored deep into Buck Barton's as the laugh faded. He leaned closer to the newcomer. "We can get gun-slingers a dime a dozen. What makes you so high on yourself?"

"Trigger-swifts like the Tomichi Kid don't come by the dozen in anybody's range," Buck Barton said evenly.

For a moment Slash Gratton did not speak, but his eyes narrowed as they studied the man before him. "The Tomichi Kid, huh?" he said at last.

Buck nodded. "You've heard of him?"

"Yeah. I've heard of him."

Buck Barton thrust his fingers into his pocket and pulled out Link Freeman's note. Gratton took it mechanically, his eyes still upon Buck. After a moment he turned to the two open-mouthed men who had brought Buck Barton in to the house.

"You, Slemp and Carver. Put up this hombre's horse. Stop at the bunkhouse and tell the rest to get up here—pronto."

As the two backed reluctantly from the room, and headed for the horse shed with Buck Barton's animal, Slash Gratton motioned Buck to the crude table. He took a chair on the opposite side. For a full minute the two men eyed each other. Gratton spoke first.

"So you're the Tomichi Kid—or so you say. Seems like I heard the Tomichi Kid stopped a slug, down along the border."

Buck Barton grinned crookedly. "I'm here, ain't I?"

"That's just the trouble, stranger. I know a feller who claims he saw the Tomichi Kid planted, down Araviso way. Says he was plenty dead, with a slug through his face." Slash Gratton's huge hand hovered over his holster as he spoke.

Buck Barton felt a shiver chase itself up and down his spine. But he did not change expression. "Did yore friend hear how come the Kid got hisself salivated?" His voice was soft and even.

"Didn't ask him—but I can."

Buck Barton's nerves and muscles tensed. What if Slash Gratton knew all about the Tomichi Kid's death? What if the big outlaw was playing with him, like a cat with a mouse? He forced a set grin to his face.

"Ain't no need to ask. Hombre who looked a heap like me did get hisself planted, down on the border. He was wearin' my clothes when he got it. I made the swap with him."

Then a wide grin broke across his face. "Here! If you don't believe it, I can show you the things that was in these clothes when I got 'em off the other hombre."

Swiftly he drew out the wallet in the inside pocket of his calfskin vest. He

thumbed through it until he found a note from old Tom Durham to the sheriff of Araviso county, introducing Buck Barton, one of his deputies. He tossed that note to Slash Gratton. His eyes were upon the big outlaw as he read the scribbled writing.

"Buck Barton seemed like a good name," Buck continued when Gratton's eyes lifted to his. "Been sort o' callin' myself that until it comes mighty nigh natural. That —an' the note and shield off the deputy got me through safe. Might be they'll help me some more."

A queer light came into Slash Gratton's eyes and a faint smile quirked the corners of his lips. Buck was sure that for the moment at least his bold statements had been believed.

"Plenty slick idea," Slash Gratton grunted. "You got through—an' headed north to join up with me, huh?"

The left corner of Buck Barton's lips curled in a sneering grin. "I've been hearin' for some spell that you an' Tom Durham don't get along none too well. Seems like there's talk you cut down a couple of his deputies. Ol' Tom is after my scalp, too. Figured we might be of some use to each other."

He watched Slash Gratton closely as he made these casual statements. The huge outlaw's brows furrowed in a frown and his mouth hardened. For an instant Buck Barton thought he could read more than a hint of suspicion in the man's eyes. Gratton's words slid between clenched teeth.

"Don't know how word of them deputies drifted down to the border. Nobody knows what happened to them. Reckon ol' Tom Durham guessed close enough, but he ain't likely to do any talking."

BUCK BARTON realized that he had spoken a little too glibly—too fast. His brain acted swiftly. "Seems like a range tramp mentioned it. Ain't plumb shore. Whoever it was didn't know a heap about it. Just rumor—an' might have got started most any way."

Slash Gratton seemed to ponder this explanation for a moment, and find it plausible. "Maybe so. I don't try to keep what I do secret. I'm boss of this part of the range. But how come you went to Freeman first?"

Buck Barton's confident grin returned. "I've always been a lone wolf. Never ask favors of nobody. I was high busted. Rode into Cobalt, figurin' on cleanin' out the express safe before I hunted you up. There was nothin' in the safe. Then Freeman dropped a hint that he knowed you."

"Link Freeman sent you to me on your own word?"

"You might read his note," Buck Barton said softly.

The huge outlaw spread the sheet of paper on the table. Buck Barton could see the smile flicker across the broad face. "Freeman's got the circular with your picture in his safe, huh? Freeman's a slick one, right enough."

For a moment Slash Gratton was silent, thick fingers drumming on the table. Buck Barton tried to read what was going on behind those narrowed eyes, but they were opaque. Then Gratton spoke slowly.

"You're worth five thousand—on the hoof, or cold meat. Right good trading stock."

Buck Barton leaned across the table. "Meanin' what?"

"Sheriff Wright has got a prisoner in his jailhouse—a gal. Caught her up on the rim of Sidewinder Canyon, when we had a run-in with his posse. I want that gal free. Reckon Wright would swap her for you. Yeah—reckon that if we'd drill you, and send your carcass down to Link Freeman, we might make the trade."

Buck Barton felt the hair crinkle on the back of his neck. He knew Slash Gratton was capable of shooting him down without fuss or argument, if it suited his purpose. But he was conscious, too, of a feeling of satisfaction that Slash Gratton thought Jean Ralston had been captured by the sheriff.

His expression did not change as his gaze swept the room, taking in the half dozen or more hard-bitten men who had slipped in and were lounging against the wall. He tried to pick the man who would be at least halfway worthy of Jean Ralston's affections. But he could find no such man. Then he faced Slash Gratton again.

"Yeah. You could gun me down—maybe. Not much of a trick, since I ain't got no irons showin'. But a gun-slinger like me with brains is worth more to you than a hundred women. Reckon you won't—"

Buck Barton stopped cold. Slash Gratton was not listening to his words. Instead, the outlaw was leaning forward, brow furrowed and head cocked to one side. Buck Barton listened intently, too —caught the faint beat of hoofs. Grat-

ton rose abruptly, glided to the door. He stood just inside, thick hands caressing the butts of his six-guns.

CHAPTER VI

TWENTY THOUSAND IN BULLION

THE sound was closer now. And in a dozen tense seconds, hoofs slid to a stop on the gravel. Then the thud of booted feet hitting the ground. Slash Gratton opened the door the merest crack—stared intently out into the darkness. Buck Barton had turned in his chair, and was facing the door.

Then Gratton drew back a step as feet pounded on the porch—came to a halt. A voice, high-pitched with excitement, came from outside. "Slash! Slash Gratton! It's me—Sisson!"

Gratton straightened slowly, dropping his six-gun back into its holster. "Come in, Sisson."

A squat man, with round face and too prominent eyes and a flat nose, stepped into the room. His gaze swept the room —rested on each man for a moment. Buck Barton seemed to feel the physical impact of the man's stare, and a little shiver chased itself up and down his spine. He caught the faint flicker of a leering smile, and was sure it was directed for his attention.

There was nothing in the least familiar about the man. He knew that he had never seen him before. But perhaps the squat hombre knew the real Tomichi Kid. Maybe knew him well enough to make Buck's disguise worse than useless. His hand hovered above the butt of his six-gun, as Sisson turned again to Slash Gratton.

"I'm bringin' great news from Cobalt, Slash. Had a talk with Link Freeman."

Again Buck Barton's spine prickled, as the man darted a glance in his direction. His jaws set, and every nerve and muscle tensed for swift and sudden action.

"Yeah? Out with it, then!" Slash Gratton's voice was a growl.

"Freeman says that McDonald of the Lucky Dagger has smuggled twenty thousand in gold bullion into Cobalt, hidden in a freight wagon."

Slash Gratton stiffened at this news, face twisted into a brutal mask. Buck Barton's quick gaze swept the rest of the outfit. Varied expressions of greed and excitement animated the hard-bitten faces. Then Gratton was speaking again.

"In the freight wagon we let go through without a search! Damn his hide, he's slicked us! But we'll—" He got hold of himself with an effort. "Suppose the gold is in the bank vault at Cobalt?"

Sisson nodded, the smirk still on his face. "Yeah. Supposed to be a secret. Only Sam Worth, the banker—an' Link Freeman knowed anything about it."

"Not even Sheriff Wright, huh?"

"Not even Sheriff Wright," Sisson answered with a wide grin. "Seems like Worth an' McDonald don't trust him a heap no more. They figure news has had a way of leaking out through Wright's office."

Slash Gratton threw back his shaggy head in a roar of mirth, and the rest of the outfit joined in. Buck Barton's eyes narrowed. It hadn't seemed particularly funny to him. But maybe there was something he didn't know—didn't understand about the deal.

Suddenly Slash Gratton was sober again. "How does McDonald figure on getting the gold on up to the railroad for shipment?"

"Freeman says McDonald has sent for a stage and six rifle guards to take the gold from Cobalt. It'll be three-four days until they get to town."

"In the meantime, the bullion is laying there in the vault," Slash Gratton muttered to himself. "Just laying there, waiting for someone to—"

He turned and faced Sisson again. You'd better get back to Cobalt in the morning. Tell Freeman to sit tight. We'll work the thing out somehow. Got time to do it in. If there's anything new shows up, you'll get us word."

"Nobody'll be lookin' for me in Cobalt before noon tomorrer. I'm s'posed to be workin' down in the southwest corner of the county." Again Sisson chuckled with evil mirth.

"Reckon there's a spare bunk for you," Gratton growled. Then he spoke to the rest of the outfit. "All of you'd better hit the hay. Me, I aim to figure out a few things, and I don't want you bothering me."

Sisson shot another knowing look at Buck Barton—a glance that disturbed the young deputy because he could not understand it. Then the outfit straggled out of the main room, following Sisson's lead. Slash Gratton strode to the table and slumped into the big chair beside it. Buck Barton moved softly forward, took the chair across from

the outlaw leader, and leaned toward him. A faint smile quirked the corners of his lips.

"I knowed you'd be needin' my help, Gratton. Crackin' a bank vault ain't no work for a pack of desert rats like yore outfit."

Slash Gratton's face went black with fury, and his thick lips writhed. "Needin' your help? Why, damn your yellow hide, my outfit's as good a bunch of gunslingers as there is in the whole high country! Any one of them could give you cards and spades, and—"

THEN the blaze of wrath seemed to burn itself out. His heavy shoulders drooped. "It's too late for help—now. That Cobalt Bank safe is so tight that a ton of dynamite wouldn't crack it. Twenty thousand dollars in gold slipped through our fingers. No way to get it now."

Still smiling, Buck Barton leaned a little closer. "That shield I took off Tom Durham's deputy—an' the paper introducin' Buck Barton. Now mebbe—" He paused.

Slash Gratton's eyes narrowed. He nodded slowly. "I—begin to—see a—glimmering of—"

Buck Barton nodded. "I ain't knowed in Cobalt."

"Meaning—"

"I could ride down to Cobalt—maybe with another of your outfit that could pass muster. Could tell Sheriff Wright an' this McDonald that I'm a deputy, workin' this part of the range for Tom Durham. Offer to help protect the shipment. Sort of work things out—"

Again Slash Gratton nodded. "You've got a few brains in that head of yours, Tomichi. Yeah—a few brains. I'll send you to Cobalt with Sisson tomorrow morning. He'll fix—"

"Wait a minute, Gratton!" Buck Barton's voice was hard and brittle. "Nobody is sendin' the Tomichi Kid nowhere! If I go, it's my own idea. Get that—my own idea. I don't like the color of Sisson's eyes—an' I ain't ridin' nowhere with him. If I ride to Cobalt, I pick my own man."

Again the black wrath swept Slash Gratton's face. For just a moment Buck Barton thought he had gone too far. He steeled himself for a test of gunspeed, and he didn't relish it. Slash Gratton began to sputter a string of lurid curses, but in a dozen seconds the wrath faded and a crafty smile spread across his thick lips.

"I wasn't ordering you, Tomichi. I was just sort of planning out loud, subject to your approval, of course. If you don't want to ride with Sisson, it's your own business. But there are some things you don't know—yet. You can sleep over it. Maybe you'll feel different in the morning. We'll let it stand there. There's a spare bunk for you too."

Buck Barton rose from his chair. "Me, I don't sleep in no bunkhouse. Too many walls. My tarp is on the back of my saddle. I'll spread my blankets under the stars—an' sleep with my six-gun next to my fist."

"You're getting mighty damned ringy, Tomichi!" Slash Gratton snapped. "But you'll get over that, if you stick with this outfit. You can sleep where you damn well please. But if it wouldn't hurt your dignity too much, you might tell Sisson I want to see him, before you turn in."

Buck Barton growled an unintelligible word, and made for the door. He had decided that the only safe way to play the game was to be tougher than the toughest—and so far it had worked. How long he could keep it up before someone discovered his trickery, was hard to guess.

He strode toward the bunkhouse with its half-dozen small, square windows that glowed redly in the darkness. He stopped there only long enough to stick his head in the door and call to Sisson. Then, when the squat man answered, he turned and made for the horse shed.

As he was loosening the thongs that held his saddle roll, he saw the shadowy figure of Sisson leave the bunkhouse and make for Slash Gratton's headquarters. For just a few moments he kept on with his task. Then he dropped the blanket roll beside the shed, and catfooted toward the log house. Slipping from bush to low boulder, taking advantage of every scrap of cover, he edged toward the lighted half-opened window of the main room.

In a scant five minutes he crouched squarely beneath this window. He could hear the voices of Slash Gratton and Sisson plainly, and knew that he had missed very little of the conversation. He strained his ears to catch every word.

"But she must be there in the jail, Sisson!" Gratton's voice was high-pitched. "She didn't show up, after the posse jumped us. And she wouldn't dare run out on me!"

These words brought Buck Barton erect, as he backed into the shadow where he

could see, but not be seen. He caught the smirk on Sisson's face and the mixture of wrath and perplexity on Gratton's.

"I ain't sayin' she's not in Cobalt," Sisson answered. "But I didn't see her—didn't hear of her. Mebbe she did get tired of tryin' to stand guard over Bob—mebbe she did head north for the Anchor range."

Slash Gratton shook his head stubbornly. "She wouldn't dare do that. She knows damn well that I meant everything I said! She knows what would happen to that whelp if she quit me."

"Mebbe you're right, Slash," Sisson said soothingly. "Anyhow, there's somethin' more important right now than the gal. You can always track her down, when the time comes."

"Yeah—an' she'll pay for it, if she's run out!" Gratton growled.

"Shore she will—but about that twenty thousand in the bank vault. That's what's worryin' me right now."

"I've got an idea, Sisson." Gratton seemed to forget the girl for a moment. "How does this sound? The Tomichi Kid is carryin' a Cattlemen's Association shield and papers. Took 'em off a deputy named Buck Barton. Claims the deputy got planted in his place. He could pass for the deputy in Cobalt."

SISSON'S eyes widened, and a little smile played across Buck Barton's lips, out there in the darkness. The squat man's voice was high with excitement.

"He could play up to ol' Wright, huh? Find out the whole lay of the deal. Maybe—"

Gratton grinned crookedly, and broke in. "But here's the part that makes it sure fire. We'll stick up the stage that brings the guards to Cobalt. When it rolls into Cobalt, I'll be tooling the team and my men will be taking the places of the guards."

"But won't Wright an' ol' Sam Worth recognize you? Won't they—"

Slash Gratton chuckled deep in his throat. "Sheriff Wright has never seen one of our outfit at close range except the three or four he's gunned down."

"Yeah—that's right," Sisson admitted admiringly. "Of course you can do it."

Gratton nodded. "When we pull up to the bank, we load the gold, and head out of town. Probably never have to fire a shot. McDonald will never know what happened when the stage fails to show up at the railroad."

A broad grin split Sisson's face. "That's plenty slick plannin', Slash. But this here Tomichi Kid—what you lettin' him horn in for?"

Slash Gratton leaned closer, but his words reached Buck Barton out in the darkness plainly. "He's worth five thousand dollars on the hoof, Sisson. And besides that, he can help us—some. He can make Wright feel easy—make him forget to keep close watch. Wright isn't as dumb as you think, and I'll be glad to have someone taking care of him."

"Yeah—but the reward?"

"After we've pulled out—got plenty of start—you can crack down on the Tomichi Kid. Take him in, and collect the reward. You can call it your split on the deal."

"I—don't know," Sisson answered slowly. "He's plenty ringy, an'—"

Slash Gratton heaved his huge bulk out of his chair. "It's set the way I've planned it, Sisson. The Tomichi Kid isn't any too willing to ride with you. Don't seem to like you much. But he'll come around—when he knows it's the only way."

"I can talk him into it," Sisson grunted. "I'll spread my blanket roll out next to his. Mebbe have a chance to put in a few words that'll help."

"Yeah. Might be a good idea," Gratton answered. "Time you were hitting the hay, anyhow. You've got work to do tomorrow."

CHAPTER VII

AN HOMBRE NAMED BOB

AS SISSON rose and turned toward the door, Buck Barton wheeled and streaked for the horse shed near which he had spread his tarp. From between the blankets, he watched the shadowy form of Sisson leave the main house and make for the bunkhouse. His eyes followed the squat man as he swung his bed roll over his shoulder and headed for the shed.

But when Sisson squatted beside him and loosed the thongs on his tarp, Buck Barton feigned sleep. A faint smile flicked his lips as he noted the unnecessary sounds the squat man made. Then the grin widened. His hand stole out and clutched the butt of his six gun. He risked a glance with half-opened eyes. Sisson was scarcely five feet from him, squatted on his heels.

With startling suddenness, Buck Barton

snapped to a sitting position in the blankets. His six-gun whipped up and swung toward Sisson. The squat man teetered—plopped back onto the ground, a startled curse bubbling from his lips. Buck Barton's voice, low but steel-threaded, cut the darkness.

"Get 'em high, hombre! A move for yore gun, an' you'll stop a slug!"

"I—I ain't—I didn't—" Sisson began.

Buck's voice stopped him sharply. "Who are you? What you roamin' around close to my tarp for? Talk fast!"

"Me, I'm Sisson! You know—the hombre that rode in tonight with news from Cobalt!" The words fairly tumbled over each other in the squat man's eagerness. "I—I didn't mean to bother you. I don't like sleepin' inside any more'n you do. Was just huntin' a spot to spread my blankets. Kind o' figured we'd be comp'ny for—"

"I don't want no company—especially the company of a ranny I ain't never seen before tonight. With all this range spread out around you, looks like you could find some other place."

"But—but I was just thinkin' that mebbe we could—you know, sort of talk things over—get acquainted, if we was goin' to ride to Cobalt together tomorrow mornin'." Sisson tone was apologetic, as he got clumsily to his feet, then hunkered on his heels again.

"Who said we was ridin' together? I tol' Slash Gratton that I was lone-wolfin' it—that I don't want nobody trailin' along with me."

"I could help you a heap in Cobalt, Kid. I know everybody in town—fact is, I'm—"

"I never asked for help in my life," Buck Barton growled. "The more I see of this outfit, the less I like it."

"Yeah?" Sisson's voice was soft and purring now. "But there's some things you don't know. Mebbe concernin' a gal—an' her—"

Buck Barton leaned toward Sisson, his eyes like twin points of flame in the darkness. His voice cut like a knife. "Yeah—a girl! I'm honin' to hear the straight of—" Suddenly he stopped. He hadn't spoken of Jean Ralston before. As far as Gratton's outfit knew, he had never seen or heard of her. Just how did Sisson know?

"Yeah—a girl," he said again, more softly. "What girl—an' what about her?"

He didn't catch Sisson's twisted grin in the darkness, but he knew it was there by the man's tone when he answered. "Gal named Jean Ralston. Same gal you left up to the cabin in the high country."

"What do you know about—"

"I make it my business to know, Kid. I wasn't ridin' with the outfit in that stick-up. I don't never ride with 'em on a job. I've got other work that's more important. But I do keep my eyes open. I saw you snake her out o' her saddle—follered you when you headed for the cabin—saw her an' talked to her after you left the first time, an' again when you headed for Gratton's hideout."

"How come you didn't bring her along with you, hombre?" Buck Barton growled. He knew there was no further use of denying what had happened. "She seemed to be right anxious to see that man of hers—was a heap more upset about him than about herself."

"That—man—of hers?" Sisson spoke slowly, haltingly, as if he did not quite understand. "You mean—Slash Gratton?"

"You know who I mean!" Buck Barton rasped. "The man she's in love with—the man Gratton is keepin' under his thumb to hold the girl."

IT WAS A good thing that Buck Barton did not see the understanding grin that swept Sisson's face—good that he could not read the thoughts that clicked into place in Sisson's brain. The squat man nodded slowly in the darkness.

"Yeah—the man she's—in love with. You mean—Bob?"

"That's the only name she gave him."

"She talked about Bob," Sisson admitted as if reluctantly. "An' I made some kind of promise to her—but I ain't aimin'—"

"What promise?" Buck Barton snapped.

"I told her that if she'd give me a line on you, I'd help Bob get away from Slash Gratton—so both of 'em could head north for the Anchor spread. But I ain't plannin' on keepin' that promise."

With the speed of a striking sidewinder, Buck Barton was out of his blankets and standing over Sisson. His six-gun prodded the hunkering man in the ribs. His voice was biting and hard.

"I swapped my promise to help in exchange for directions to Gratton's hideout. You swapped yore promise for my trail. We're both keepin' them promises."

"I—I can't, Kid! I didn't mean to keep it when I made it! Gratton would gun down any hombre that was even thinkin'

of helpin' Jean Ralston an' her—her sweetheart get away from him. You don't know that hombre, Kid!"

"An' you don't know me. Either you keep yore promise—or I drill you plumb center. You can take yore choice."

"But Slash Gratton—" Buck Barton could not see the narrowed eyes and the cunning grin that belied Sisson's tone of fear.

"Slash Gratton's bullets are no heavier than mine!" Buck said evenly.

"You got me where I don't know which way to jump," Sisson whined. "I get salivated, no matter which—"

"There's one way," Buck Barton answered softly. "One way—an' plumb safe for you."

"You—you mean—"

"Which one of the men was this here Bob? Was he with the outfit in the house tonight?"

"Yeah, he was there." Sisson apparently was startled by the abrupt question. "Why?"

"Which one?"

"Sort of slim, white-faced hombre. Weak-lookin' chin and a pasty face. Stood back in the corner, not sayin' nothin'. But I don't see—"

"All right. You tell Slash Gratton that I won't ride to Cobalt with you. Tell him that I done picked out the man I'm ridin' with—an' that it's this here Bob hombre. Do that, an' you're keepin' yore promise—savin' yore hide at the same time."

For a full minute Sisson did not answer, and Buck Barton began to get impatient. He prodded the hunkering man deeper with the muzzle of his six-gun.

"Make up yore mind damn quick, hombre. My finger's gettin' itchy!"

"I'll—I'll try it," Sisson said at last. "I don't think Slash Gratton'll like it none at all—but I'll try."

"You'd better try plenty hard," Buck Barton growled, as he holstered his six-gun and sat down on his blankets again.

Sisson drew a long, quavering breath, but the grin did not fade entirely from his face. For a moment he did not move, and Buck Barton spoke again.

"Spread yore tarp, Sisson. I'll not gun you, as long as you don't keep me awake with yore snorin'."

Buck watched until Sisson was between his blankets. Then he settled down, and was asleep in a dozen breaths. Sisson lay quietly until he caught Buck's slow, even breathing. Then he slipped with Apache caution from his bed roll, leaving the blankets humped like a prone body.

With silent speed, he made for the log house. There was still a light in the main room, and Sisson breathed easier, knowing that Slash Gratton was still up. He knocked softly at the door—entered when Gratton opened it cautiously.

"Well?" Gratton spoke only that single word, as his eyes bored into Sisson's.

"He won't ride with me. Hard-headed as a moss-horn. He done picked Bob from the outfit as the hombre he wants to side with—an' I can't budge him from that idea."

"Bob?" Gratton's eyes narrowed dangerously and his hands clenched at his side. "He—picked—Bob! D'you think he's in cahoots with Jean Ralston? D'you think he's trying to get Bob away from the outfit?"

A twisted grin crossed Sisson's face. "I thought of that, Slash. Sounded him out, cautious like. He ain't never heerd of that gal. Reckon he wants some dumb-lookin' dogie along with him—some hombre that won't do no thinkin' on his own, but jus' foller directions."

"Couldn't have done better, if that's what he's after," Gratton grunted.

He heaved his bulk from his chair and strode across the room. He pivoted on his heel and stamped back. Sisson watched him out of glittering, cunning eyes. The squat man seemed to find something amusing in Slash Gratton's uneasiness.

"If you're scared of him, Gratton, I'll—"

"Scared? Damn your hide, I'm not afraid of anyone—or anything!" Gratton snarled.

"I didn't mean it that way," Sisson hastened to say. "I meant that if you was afeared the Tomichi Kid was tryin' to snake Bob outa the outfit, I'd be plumb tickled to tail him. I could keep my eyes skinned, an' crack down if he tried anything."

For a moment Gratton was silent. Then he looked unblinkingly into Sisson's eyes. At last he nodded. "Might be a good idea, Sisson. And remember this, I'll hold you accountable if he doublecrosses me."

"Fair enough, Slash," Sisson grunted. "If I let five thousand dollars reward slip through my fingers, I deserve to be pistol-whipped."

Gratton stepped toward the door. Sisson rose and followed him. "Better get some sleep now, feller," Gratton ordered. "You'll

want to be out along the trail by the time he starts in the morning."

CHAPTER VIII

THE DESERTED CABIN

WHEN BUCK BARTON awoke, Sisson was gone. For a moment he was worried. He usually slept so lightly that any little sound would awaken him. But it had been several nights since he had an uninterrupted chance for sleep, and he had been dead to the world. Anyhow, Sisson's absence made little difference.

He expected Slash Gratton to fly into a rage when he told him that he had chosen Bob instead of Sisson to accompany him to Cobalt—and was a little surprised when Gratton agreed grudgingly.

"You'd just as well go it alone, for all the good he can do you," Gratton growled. "But you'll likely see Sisson around, anyhow. He's the hombre who keeps me in touch with what's going on down there. If you need him—"

"I won't be needin' him—nor anybody," Buck Barton said shortly. "I skin my own skunks—always. Picked that pasty-faced youngster because he looks like he won't be stickin' his nose into my business."

Gratton nodded. "He's not much to look at—and no better when it comes to action. But he's right important to me. I'd be some put out if anything should happen to him—like running out on us, for instance."

A twisted grin spread across Buck's face. "I'll watch him like a range cow watches her calf."

Buck Barton and the slender youngster did not head directly for Cobalt. He could have given Bob the directions to the log cabin in the hills, and have set him on his way. But he could not erase the picture of Jean Ralston from his mind. He tried to tell himself that she was an outlaw's sweetheart—that she was playing him for a sucker—using him to snake her lover from the outfit.

But it did not work. There were a dozen excuses why he should ride to the cabin—why he should see her. That these excuses were flimsy made no difference, because he did not want them to. At last he gave over arguing with himself, and headed into the hills.

For five miles or more he did not speak to the rider who trailed him. For no reason that he could put his finger on, he resented the slim youngster's presence—resented even his existence. He wasn't fit to look at Jean Ralston, let alone hold her love. Why, he was hardly a grown man—weak, both in mind and body.

A mirthless smile played around the corners of his lips. How much stronger was he, himself? Taking a chance of getting gunned down—riding squarely into Slash Gratton's hideout—all because an outlaw's woman asked him to, pled with misty eyes that hid a twisted soul.

At last he turned in his saddle and spoke gruffly to the rider behind him. "Slash Gratton was off the trail when he said Jean Ralston was in the jailhouse."

He watched the sudden light grow in the youngster's eyes, saw a spot of color come to each cheek and a faint smile to the slack lips. The young rider's words were hardly more than a whisper that barely reached Buck Barton's ears.

"You—you mean she didn't get caught?"

"She got caught, right enough—but not by Sheriff Wright. I snaked her out from under the posse. She's up in my cabin at the head of the slope."

"Jean—is in yore—cabin? Is it close?"

"Yeah. She's there—an' we will be right sudden. I gave her my promise that I'd bring you to her—damned if I know why."

The youngster spoke shakily, breathlessly. "You—you saved her from the posse—but you didn't bring her to Slash Gratton's hideout. I can't figure out why—"

"None of yore business!" Buck Barton snapped. "I promised to bring you—an' she swore you an' her would ride north as fast as yore horses would carry you."

"But I can't do that! Slash Gratton would foller us—he'd—"

BUCK BARTON'S lips twisted in a sneer. He knew he was going soft, but he rasped out another promise. "I'll take care of that end of it. Slash Gratton'll never harm you. You take yore woman—an' ride hell-bent!"

"I'm—I'm afraid!"

Buck Barton hardly heard the trembling words. He was prodding his roan up the treacherous slope, and the youngster followed. The slab roof of the little cabin loomed above the brush. Buck Barton looked instinctively for the thin column of smoke that should be arising from the chimney. There was none.

His jaws set and his face hardened. What if Sisson had lied to him—what if the squat man had spirited Jean Ralston to Gratton's hideout, and was laughing at the trick he had played? Buck's brain seethed with bitter thoughts—with anger at himself for believing Sisson's words.

Then a crooked smile flicked his lips. Maybe he was jumping to conclusions. The absence of smoke proved nothing. Perhaps Jean Ralston was still asleep. Maybe the cabin was low on wood, and she had not gathered any more. Might be a dozen reasons why there was no smoke from the chimney.

He prodded his roan to a faster gait, and the slim rider followed close at his heels. They burst through the ring of thick brush into the tiny clearing. Buck's eyes narrowed as the cabin came into view. The door was shut, and there was no sign of occupancy. He shot a glance at the young rider—noted the anxious look on the weak face.

Buck Barton pulled his horse to a stop at the narrow slab porch. He fairly threw himself from the saddle and stepped to the door. He knocked twice, expecting no answer. He lifted the latch and crashed the door wide. There was no sound from inside—no hint that anyone had been there for days.

Black wrath coursed through his veins. He searched the little lean-to at the back, although he knew it would do no good. The youngster stood uncertainly just inside the door, his wide eyes following the square-shouldered man. Apparently he sensed the anger that filled Buck's heart, for he almost cringed when Buck Barton turned to him.

"Yore woman run out on us—hightailed it! She couldn't stay put. Just like a damned skirt—you can't depend on anything they promise. Never was one that played the game square. I knowed when I promised her—"

"But—but Jean wouldn't do that! She wouldn't run out on me—wouldn't break her—"

"She did, damn her! She's gone!" Then he drove back his anger with an effort. "But me, I ain't breakin' mine. I got you free of Slash Gratton—an' you're ridin' north to the Anchor spread!"

"I can't, without knowin'—"

"Ride, damn you! Ride, before I lose my temper an' fill yore skinny carcass with lead! Ride—an' don't turn back! I'll be watchin' you!"

Half whimpering, the youngster turned and staggered from the cabin. Buck Barton watched with growing disgust, as the slim rider swung awkwardly into his saddle and reined his horse around. He barked another order, and the youngster nodded wordlessly. He turned his horse into the dim trail to the north.

Buck Barton stalked across the narrow porch and climbed into his own saddle. For a full five minutes he sat there, mind a furnace of burning, bitter thoughts. Then he grunted a curse and tightened his reins. To hell with the brown-eyed, double-crossing girl. He had fulfilled his promise—and now there was really important work ahead.

HE RISKED barely a glance into the north. The slim youngster had already disappeared into the almost trackless tangle. Buck reined his horse abruptly into the down trail. Scarcely a quarter of a mile from the little cabin, the faint, far-away crack of a gun reached him dimly, but his mind was too filled to pay any attention. It was not until many hours afterward that he was to remember that sound.

The trail to Cobalt was long—a full fifteen miles as the eagle flies, and nearly twice that long by the path he must follow. For once his native trail sense and alertness deserted him—driven from his mind by the thoughts that flooded it.

For a while wrath at the girl and disgust at himself brought curses from his lips. Then for another stretch his brain was filled with worry for the girl. Perhaps she had not tricked him. Maybe something had happened to her. He could think of a hundred calamities that might have overtaken her. More than once he was on the point of turning back to the cabin, but each time his better judgment won out.

The miles of tangled, tumbled hills unwound beneath his roan's hoofs. Buck Barton scarcely noticed the trail—did not once catch a glimpse of the squat rider who followed from a barely safe distance. He pulled his horse to a halt on the crest of a jagged ridge, and swept the valley below.

It was a narrow valley with steep walls—a tree-choked valley with a stream rumbling down from the high range to the west. The little town of Cobalt and the clearing it did not quite fill were like a brown splotch on a green carpet. From where Buck Barton sat, Cobalt looked peaceful and quiet enough. His lips twisted in a smile without humor.

Before long things were likely to happen in Cobalt—things that would be startling to the little town—yes, and to Slash Gratton and his outfit. For a few moments his mind turned from the thoughts that had been riding it hard. The memory of Simms and Lassiter, the two deputies who had died by Slash Gratton's bullets, swept back upon him.

Memories of old Tom Durham, too—and the old officer's doubt as to Buck's ability to do what the others had failed to accomplish. Tom Durham would be surprised, Buck told himself, if he could see him now—could know what had happened in the last few days. But the boss would be pleased—he knew that.

He drew a long breath, settled his feet firmly in the stirrups and gathered up the reins. He did not sense the rider who had drawn to within fifty yards of him—who was sitting his saddle right now, under the partial cover of an upthrust boulder. He did not see the rifle raised to the man's shoulder—did not even hear its brittle crack.

He was hardly conscious even of the shattering blow that caught him between the shoulders—that crashed him forward across the saddle-horn. Did not feel the tearing agony of the bullet as it plowed through his body. Only that tiny fraction of a second of grim agony—then darkness, deep and profound.

CHAPTER IX

INSIDE—LOOKING OUT

BUCK BARTON groaned — tried with all his might to raise his hand to his throbbing head. Strangely, his muscles seemed flabby and his arm made of lead. He strove to open his eyes—did force the lid of the left one open a crack. The light cut like a knife stroke, and his brain whirled dizzily.

For a time he did not try again. Everything seemed unreal to him—like a pain-filled nightmare. Memory was hazy. He recalled snatches of what had happened, but he could not piece them together. Once more the groan came from his dry, cracked lips. Once more he exerted every ounce of strength he could muster.

His hand lifted a few inches—but dropped back again. His left eye opened once more, and this time he held it open until his vision began to clear. Little by little it came back to him that he was stretched out on his back. He could see the rough slabs of a ceiling above him. He could catch the streaks of light that slanted across his face.

For a time he was content to lie there without attempting further movements. With consciousness returning, the agony of his hurts was increasing in intensity. He drew a long breath, and a gurgling moan came from his lips unbidden from the pain of that deep breath.

He remembered now sitting his saddle just outside Cobalt—he recalled looking down at the drab little town. But that was his last memory. Something had shattered the world around him—sent him reeling into darkness, but he did not know what it was.

Now, with grim power of will, Buck Barton's muscles tightened—answered his brain. Slowly he rolled over onto his right side toward the light, agony biting deep at every movement. His brain swirled dizzily and bright exploding dots danced in front of his eyes. He choked back the grunt that the pain forced from his throat, but could not entirely stifle it.

Then his eyes steadied—held on what confronted him. A bare wall, with a little square window only slightly above the level of the bunk upon which he lay. A window that was heavily barred with iron rods. Buck blinked quickly—then stared again.

His pale lips tightened to a thin, straight line. Laboriously, painfully he turned his body over on the other side. Again his brain whirled and his eyes were hazy—but again they cleared. In front of him now was another wall—this time with a thick door in which there was a still smaller barred window.

"In—jail!" The words were hardly more than a whisper. "I'm—in jail! Somethin'—"

The whispered words faded, as his ears caught the thump of booted feet outside. He closed his eyes to the merest crack, as he turned himself to his back again. He heard the key click in the lock—heard the creak of the door being swung wide. Every impulse told him to open his eyes—to see who was standing in the doorway. But he repressed it grimly.

Then another pair of feet pounding the floor—coming to a halt at the door. Now a voice that he did not recognize. "Ain't

woke up yet, huh? Reckon he's not—"

"He ain't dead, if that's what you mean, Doc. Tough as an old boot, that hombre. He'll live to stretch rope."

"Wouldn't have give ten cents for his chances, sheriff," the first speaker answered. "Didn't look like he could live an hour, with that hole through him. But if he's still alive—"

Buck Barton had all he could do to keep from opening his eyes as he heard those words. He knew where he was now—knew that Sheriff Wright was standing there in the doorway of the little cell in the Cobalt jail. Nor did he miss the implication of the sheriff's statement that he'd live to stretch rope. He had a hazy idea of what had happened now. He had been bush-whacked, out there on the rim of the valley, and dragged into jail.

But now the two men in the doorway were moving toward his bunk. He followed them by the sound of their footsteps, as he closed his eyes still tighter. His brain was clearing fast now, and he waited tensely. Now a hand dropped heavily upon his wrist—he could feel a finger searching for his pulse.

"Still beatin'—steady, but not too strong," the man called Doc grunted. "Little color comin' back to his face. Shock wearin' off, most likely."

"Yeah," the sheriff muttered. "He'll be wakin' up soon. I heerd him groanin' a little spell ago. That's why I sent for you again."

"He'll come around all right now," the doctor said evenly. "The bullet didn't hit a vital spot, seems like. Don't know how it could miss, though. Went in square between his shoulder blades an' come out close to his neck." The doctor's voice was even lower now. "I can't figure out you law-men, though. Wantin' to save his life—so you can take it away from him."

"The law has got to take its course." Sheriff Wright's voice held a little rasp. "He's a killer—a rustler an' a holdup. The law says he's got to be hung, an' I'm duty bound to uphold that law."

"Shore! Shore!" the doctor grunted. "I ain't blamin' you—personal."

NOW Buck Barton could hear the shuffle of feet as the sawbones backed away from the bunk. "Nothin' more that I can do," the doctor said. "I've plugged up the holes. Nature'll do the rest—in time."

"How long before he'll be onto his feet, Doc?"

"Maybe a week—maybe two or three. Can't tell. Depends on him."

Buck Barton's jaw set as he heard this statement. A week or two! He wouldn't be on his back that long—he couldn't. For now memory had returned to him. He knew why he had come to Cobalt—knew what was due to happen when the bullion stage pulled into town. He had to be on his feet, and pronto.

He risked opening his left eye a crack. Sheriff Wright stood almost squarely over him, but the man's back was toward him. A big man, with broad, heavy shoulders and thick legs. Grizzled hair beneath the broad gray J. B. twin six-guns at his thighs.

Beyond the old officer was the doctor, half turned toward the door. A thin, wiry man with leathery face and a stubby gray mustache. Dressed in store clothes that were much the worse for age and wear. But competent in appearance, with clean-cut features and a firm mouth.

Then the doctor turned and stepped outside the cell. "I'll be droppin' in every now an' then, Wright. Reckon it's my responsibility to keep him alive as much as yores."

Sheriff Wright did not move as the doctor made for the front door of the little jail. His shoulders seemed to hunch a little lower, and his shaggy gray head moved slowly from side to side.

Buck Barton's eyes were wide open now. His strength seemed to be returning fast, and with it the tearing agony of his hurts. When the sheriff took a step toward the door at last, Buck Barton spoke softly.

"Sheriff Wright—I'm hankerin' to make a little talk with you."

The old sheriff whirled with speed and agility unusual for a man of his bulk. His head was thrust forward, and his gray-green eyes bored into Buck Barton's. His lower jaw stuck out like a crag, and his cleft chin was granite-firm. Buck Barton sensed at first glimpse that here was a doggedly honest man—a little slow in thought, perhaps, but a square shooter in every sense of the word.

"You're awake, huh?" the sheriff grunted at last. "Been just as well off if you'd never come out of it."

"Meanin'?"

"You're due to dance on air, as soon as Jedge Cornwall comes down for court."

For a moment Buck Barton was silent. Then his eyes met Sheriff Wright's. "Who do you figure you've jailed?"

A frown furrowed the sheriff's brow, and his eyes narrowed. "You ain't tryin' to claim you're not the Tomichi Kid, are you?"

A twisted smile played across Buck Barton's face. So Link Freeman had double-crossed him, after all. Perhaps had waited out there under cover to gun him down when he rode into Cobalt. Maybe upon Slash Gratton's orders. Turned him over to the sheriff for the reward.

"I suppose you've got plenty proof?" Buck asked softly.

"Plenty! Wanted circular, with yore face onto it. The shield an' papers you took off Tom Durham's deputy, Buck Barton, when you gunned him down. The word of a man who's seen the Tomichi Kid, an' is willin' to swear you're him."

Buck Barton's lips thinned. He was silent for a moment. Then he looked up at the sheriff again. "Reckon it wouldn't do no good to tell you I'm Buck Barton, Tom Durham's deputy—that the Tomichi Kid is really dead, down Araviso way?"

"None whatever. That's jest what I was lookin' for you to say, but it's no go. You'll swing as soon as you're able."

Slowly it began to be clear to Buck Barton just what kind of a spot he was in. There was not a single man in Cobalt who knew Buck Barton, Tom Durham's deputy. But there were several on the range, and at least one right here in Cobalt, who were certain he was the Tomichi Kid. Then there was that man who had seen the Kid, and was willing to swear identification.

"Who is this here hombre who knows the Tomichi Kid?" Buck asked softly. "Are you shore he ain't tryin' to—"

"My first deputy—the man who brought you in. I trust him from the word 'go'—or he wouldn't be workin' for me."

"Then it wasn't Link Freeman who gunned me?"

The old sheriff leaned a little closer. "Link Freeman? What do you mean, feller? Do you know Link Freeman?"

"Yeah—I know him," Buck said wearily, sinking back onto the bunk. "But I reckon you ain't in no notion of hearin' me—now. Anyhow, I'm sort of tangled up in my own mind. This here deputy of yores—where is he now? I'd admire to talk to him a little."

"Out in the hills lookin' for that other hombre that was ridin' with you. Figures mebbe there's a reward onto his head, too. Sisson is a good man, even if he does think a little more about collectin' rewards than is good for him."

Buck Barton's eyes went wide, and an unintelligible exclamation came from his lips. He half rose on his bunk—then dropped back with a groan of agony. The old sheriff looked down at him, a little startled by his prisoner's sudden excitement.

"You act like you know Sisson, Tomichi Kid—like you'd met up with him before. He's seen you—plenty, when he was workin' down along the line. But he didn't figure—"

Buck Barton shook his head wearily. "Must be—some other hombre—I'm thinkin' of."

The sheriff backed to the door of the cell, his eyes still upon the man on the bunk. He stopped for just a second for a last word. "I'll see that you get fed—that the doc visits you occasional. Aim to get you onto yore feet in time for the hangin'."

"Thanks, Wright," Buck Barton grunted.

CHAPTER X

DOUBLE-CROSS

FOR A FULL ten minutes after Sheriff Wright left the little cell, Buck Barton lay motionless, his eyes closed and his hands clenched at his sides. But his brain was clear now—acting smoothly and swiftly. He reviewed the events of the past few days, and the picture began to take definite form. That picture was very close to accurate.

Sisson had double-crossed the sheriff—and Slash Gratton, too. As he thought it over now, it seemed to Buck that Sisson might be even more dangerous than the outlaw leader. Certainly he had more ruthless cunning—less conscience, if that were possible.

Buck had no doubt now that Sisson had trailed him and the slim youngster, Bob, from Gratton's hideout. He grinned wryly. The squat man had let him come in under his own power until Cobalt was in sight before gunning him down—saving himself work and trouble.

Then Buck Barton caught his breath sharply. That youngster, Jean Ralston's

man—and Jean Ralston herself! What had happened to them? Certainly Sisson had lied to them, too. Maybe Jean was being held a prisoner somewhere else in the hills—or even possible that Sisson had taken her back to Gratton's place. And Bob! Buck recalled that faint rifle report now that had drifted down to him soon after he left the log cabin.

"He never aimed to let Bob go free!" Buck muttered. "An' me, like a dumb dogie, believed I had outsmarted him. A hell of a C. A. man I turned out to be!"

Nor was Buck Barton far wrong in his surmises. But on one point Sisson had not lied to Sheriff Wright. He had seen the Tomichi Kid at close quarters. But he knew that Buck Barton and the Tomichi Kid were not the same. He had been on the point of telling Slash Gratton that Buck was an impostor, when his plan began to take shape in his mind.

That night, between the time of his talk with Buck and his second report to Slash Gratton, he had figured it all out—to his own advantage. When Buck Barton and the pasty-faced youngster left Gratton's hideout, Sisson was watching out along the trail. He followed them at a safe distance clear to the log cabin in the high country.

He had been as much surprised to find that Jean Ralston was not there as were Buck and the slim rider. But he guessed that the girl had believed and trusted in both himself and Buck Barton—that she had ridden north, certain that Bob would follow.

When Buck Barton and the youngster parted at the cabin, he waited behind a huge boulder along the trail for Bob. The shot Buck had heard was not aimed to kill, but only to stop the frightened young rider. He had left Bob, tightly bound to a tree, while he followed Buck.

Then that shot from behind that cut Buck down—the delivery of the wounded man to the sheriff, with the story that he was the Tomichi Kid. Then back into the hills, where he had left his first prisoner. The tumbled, tangled trail back to Gratton's hideout.

While Buck Barton, there in his cell, was working out the whole thing in his mind, Sisson and the slim rider were facing Slash Gratton. There was still the smirk on Sisson's face, and the wide-eyed fear on Bob's.

"The Tomichi Kid headed him north, Gratton. I figured he was makin' for the Anchor spread. Knowed you didn't want that to happen—knowed you wanted him here. So I brought him back."

"Yeah—you did right, Sisson!" Slash Gratton growled. "But the Tomichi Kid—where is he?"

Sisson's cunning grin widened. "I follered him plumb to Cobalt. But he jumped me on the rim of the valley. I had to plug him."

"Dead, huh?" A frown furrowed Slash Gratton's brow.

Sisson shook his head. "Not immediate. Blasted a hole through him. Turned him over to Sheriff Wright. Doc Winters worked on him. Don't know if he'll ever wake up. Looked pretty far gone."

Slash Gratton nodded. "You'd better hope he kicks off, Sisson. The Tomichi Kid is plenty pizen."

"I downed him once—an' I can do it again," Sisson said evenly.

Now Slash Gratton leaned across the table, his eyes narrowed. "But the gal—Jean Ralston? Did you find out—"

Sisson shook his head. "She wasn't in the jailhouse, an' Wright don't know nothin' about her. Mebbe she's met up with the Tomichi Kid—might have seen him afore he headed this way. Looks like he might have promised to get Bob loose from yore outfit. If that's what happened, likely she's holed up somewhere waitin' for him to show up."

GRATTON'S frown deepened. "If I could get my hands onto that Tomichi Kid hombre, I'd—"

Sisson's lips twisted into a sneering grin. "She'll be back, Slash—soon as she knows Bob is here. You ain't got no worry on that score."

Slash Gratton nodded absently. "Reckon you're right, Sisson. You've done right good work." Then he looked up, a hint of disquiet in his eyes. "But the Tomichi Kid—d'you reckon he'll tell the sheriff what's due to happen, when the stage rolls into Cobalt for that bullion?"

Sisson shook his head. "I fixed that. Tol' Sheriff Wright that the Tomichi Kid is plenty slick—that he'll cook up all kinds of yarns to get hisself loose from the noose. Wright is dumb as a dogie. He won't listen to nothin' the Kid says, even if he don't die off afore he can talk."

"Yeah. That's good. Then we'll keep right on with what we planned. Didn't

figure on the Tomichi Kid helping much, anyhow. Maybe with him in the jailhouse, Cobalt will have somethin' to keep 'em excited—won't be thinking about anything else."

"If there ain't enough excitement in Cobalt when I ride back, I'll stir up a little. Mebbe them Cobalt hombres might get the idea that the Tomichi Kid ought to get hisself hung, even afore the judge holds court."

Slash Gratton grinned crookedly. "Good idea, Sisson. If you could sort of start things rolling—whisper in the right ears—"

Sisson rose and stretched himself. "Better be forkin' my bronc, Slash. I tol' Wright I was headin' into the hills to hunt for the Tomichi Kid's sidekick." A smile flicked his lips. "It'll grieve me somethin' painful to tell him the hombre got away from me."

As he turned toward the door, Slash Gratton stopped him. "About the stage that's coming for the bullion—have you got any further line on when it's due?"

"Only got to talk a minute with Link Freeman. He 'lows McDonald is lookin' for it around the middle of the afternoon Sat'day."

"And this is Tuesday," Gratton grunted. "Four days to get ready. I'm counting on you getting word to me if there's any change in the plans."

"I'll watch that end of it," Sisson answered. "Unless you hear different, you can figure on jumpin' it at Skull Canyon. I'll have things lined up in Cobalt so's nobody'll bother you while you're loadin' the bullion."

When Sisson strode from the log and stone house, Gratton watched the squat man swing into his saddle and head into the Cobalt trail. Then he stepped out onto the porch and called the man who leaned indolently against the bunkhouse, fifty yards down the slope.

"You, Slemp! You and Carver bring Bob up here! I want to make talk with him."

Without waiting for an answer, he turned back into the main room, and slumped into his big chair. He drummed on the table with stubby fingers impatiently until booted feet sounded on the slab porch. His face twisted into a scowl as Slemp and Carver pushed the frightened youngster into the room.

After a moment of tense silence during which Bob's eyes grew still wider, more fear-filled, Gratton's harsh voice barked out at him. "Come here, you double-crossing brush-jumper! Pronto!"

Reluctantly, awkwardly the slim youngster shuffled to the table. He tried to return Gratton's glare, but his eyes dropped and his mouth went slack.

"So you figured you could run out on me, huh? What did the Tomichi Kid tell you—what did he promise you?"

"He—he wouldn't talk to me—let me explain. All he said was that I was leavin' yore outfit, an' ridin' north to the Anchor. Said he'd drill me if I didn't. I—I didn't know what else to do. I was—afraid."

"Yeah—you've always been yellow. You're plumb worthless for anything—except to keep Jean lined up."

Then Gratton leaned across the table, his glittering eyes boring into the slim youngster's—his hands clenched into tight fists and his mouth twisted into a snarl.

"The girl—where is she?"

"I—I don't know."

"You lie, damn your yellow hide! Talk fast, or you'll wish the Tomichi Kid had drilled you!"

"I'm telling the truth—honest, I am!" the youngster answered in a terror-tightened voice. "The Tomichi Kid said she'd be at the log cabin up in the hills—but she wasn't."

"What cabin? Sisson didn't say anything about that."

In words that tumbled over each other, Bob told the outlaw leader what had happened—how they had stopped at the empty cabin—how the Tomichi Kid had ordered him to ride north—how Sisson had jumped him a half mile beyond—had bound him to a tree, while he went after the Kid. Slash Gratton listened, his lips writhing.

"If I thought Sisson was holding out on me— But likely he didn't know why you stopped at the cabin—didn't figure it was important." Then he nodded. "Sisson guessed that the Tomichi Kid had seen Jean—talked to her. Sisson's plenty smart—sometimes I think he's too smart."

Then he glared at the youngster again. "I'm keepin' you locked in the saddle-house, feller—until Jean shows up. If she don't come back—" His twisted leer spoke more than words.

"She'll—she'll be back! I know she will, when she knows I'm here!" The slim rider's voice was near to the breaking point.

"She'd better—for your sake—and hers!"

Now Gratton spoke to Slemp and Carver, who were lounging against the north wall. "Take him to the saddle-house, hombres! See that he gets nothing but bread and water until I give the word."

They grinned and advanced to young Bob's side. They grasped his arms and propelled him to the door. Slash Gratton rose and followed, watching until the saddle-house door closed behind the slim youngster. Then he went back to his chair and slumped into it.

CHAPTER XI

A GRIM PROMISE

BACK in his cell, Buck Barton was gaining his strength again much more rapidly than even he had hoped. By the time dusk was edging up the slopes, filling the valleys with purple, he was able to sit shakily upon the edge of his bunk. His wound still throbbed with almost unbearable agony, but he found by cautious experiment that he could move slowly without adding to the pain.

Once, while he was sitting up in his bunk, he heard the pound of feet in the corridor. He lay down hastily, and shut his eyes to the narrowest crack. He heard the door open—heard heavy feet advancing to his side. Dimly, through almost closed lids, he made out the rugged face of Sheriff Wright above him. For a full minute the old officer stared down.

Buck Barton breathed as shallowly as he could, and allowed a weak groan to bubble from his lips. At last the sheriff grunted an unintelligible word, and turned on his heel. A faint smile flicked Buck's lips, as the cell door closed. Just as well that Sheriff Wright thought he was near death. A dying man is not as closely watched as a strong one.

Again, after darkness settled, the sheriff came to the cell again. This time the doctor was with him. Both entered and stood above Buck. Now Buck's eyes were open, and he whispered a greeting—a weak whisper that barely reached the ears of the two men.

"He don't seem to be gettin' no better, Doc," Sheriff Wright said softly.

The doctor only grunted, as he took Buck's wrist. He felt for the pulse—found it, and his lips moved as he counted. Then he dropped the wrist and squinted down in the lamp light at the drawn face. He shook his head slowly.

"Ain't got no fever. Wrist as cool as a frosty rock. Pulse strong an' steady, too. Ought to be lookin' a heap perkier than he is."

The sawbones stooped and looked at the bandages across Buck's broad chest. "Bandages dry. Bleedin' has been stopped for a good spell. He'll be comin' round, all right."

"You don't think he's tryin' to trick us, Doc? Is he mebbe feelin' better than he lets on? If I thought—"

The doctor shook his head. "That hole was plenty big, Wright. I don't know when I've seen a worse gunshot. By rights, he'd ought to be dead. You don't need to be afeared he'll try to break jail for quite a spell."

Then the doctor looked up at Sheriff Wright, a troubled light in his kind old eyes. "That shot, now—it come from behind. Don't seem like no gun-slinger like the Tomichi Kid would turn his back, when he was swapping lead with a deputy sheriff."

Sheriff Wright blinked swiftly—then shot a look down at Buck. He shook his head. "I didn't think of that. But Sisson said he downed him, after the Tomichi Kid's first bullet missed him by a hair. Sisson is a good man, an' I don't doubt his word."

"Yeah—well, it don't make no great amount of difference. He's here—an' certainly he deserves to be."

The doctor turned toward the door, and Wright made to follow him. Buck's weak voice halted them. "I'm gettin' right—dry. An' a—little hungry. If'n you—could bring me—a cup of water—an' mebbe a little somethin'—to eat—"

Sheriff Wright half turned. "Yeah. I'll take care of it."

Alone once more, Buck Barton hoisted his aching body to a sitting position again. It was pure agony, but he had to move—had to recover his strength quickly. He couldn't lie there on his bunk like a sick dogie while things were happening.

This time he did not lie down when he heard approaching steps. But he did lean back against the wall, twisting his face into a mask of pain, and closing his eyes almost tight. The light of the lamp flickered through the bars of the door, as the man in the corridor neared the cell. The

lock clicked, and the door opened wide enough to a squat, heavy-bodied man.

Buck Barton caught his breath sharply, as he saw the face in the circle of ruddy lamp light. "Sisson!" he breathed. "Sisson, the back-shootin' double-crossin'—"

SISSON stepped toward the bunk, a wide grin on his round face. He set the lamp down on the box that served as a table, and dropped onto the single backless chair in the cell. Buck had opened his eyes wide, and was staring straight into Sisson's. The deputy's grin widened and the crinkles at the corners of his eyes deepened.

"So the bullet didn't rub you plumb out, after all?" There was a mocking tone in Sisson's voice.

Buck Barton did not answer for a moment. Seething wrath filled his veins, sent sudden strength surging through him. But at last he fought down the impulse that urged him to jump the deputy right there. That would have been a senseless thing to do, he told himself. Only give Sisson a chance to finish what he had started.

"You don't pack a bullet that'll down the Tomichi Kid!" he said, his voice low but filled with venom.

Sisson shook his head. "Nope. You're right. Mostly because the Tomichi Kid is —already dead an' planted."

Buck Barton started a little at that statement, and Sisson's twisted grin widened still more. "Yeah," he said softly, leaning closer to Buck. "I know you ain't the Tomichi Kid—but Buck Barton, Tom Durham's deputy. Don't be scared, though. I won't tell nobody. Slash Gratton believes you—an' so does Sheriff Wright. Reckon that's the way you want it."

A faint smile flicked Buck Barton's lips. "You're slick, Sisson. But no back-shooter ever come out on top. Some day a bullet'll bore you—from the front. An' like as not it'll be one of mine."

Sisson shook his head with mock sadness. "Not yores, feller. You're due to stretch rope."

"Sheriff Wright may think I'm the Tomichi Kid," Buck said evenly. "But ol' Tom Durham knows different—an' he'll be down this way before the judge gets here. I'll be free in plenty time to round you up, along with the rest of Slash Gratton's outfit."

Sisson drew a long breath. "Sorry to disappoint you, feller—but I'm afeared the folks here in Cobalt ain't likely to wait for the judge. You see, they don't think much of hombres like the Tomichi Kid."

Buck Barton's nerves and muscles tightened. He hadn't thought of that before. But now he realized just what Sisson was hinting at. The crooked deputy was not above stirring up a mob, that shouldn't be so hard to do in Cobalt.

"Maybe you can get me mobbed, Sisson—but at least Jean Ralston an' her man are free of you an' Slash Gratton!" Buck's eyes narrowed as he watched Sisson's face for any hint of the answer to the question that had been bothering him.

Sisson shook his head, grinned again. "Bob is back at Gratton's place. I took him there after I brought you in. An' the gal will be trailin' in, as soon as she hears he didn't get away. You failed even in that, feller. Tom Durham shore sent a boy to mill this time."

"What d'you mean—this time?" Buck snapped the question swiftly, hoping to find out something definite about Simms and Lassiter.

"Out in Slash Gratton's private room in his hideout, there's a couple of shields, a pair of gun-belts with filled holsters, an' two silk neckerchiefs. Seems as though Slash took 'em off a pair of law-men who come snoopin' around the high country. Gratton don't like lawmen—none a-tall."

"Yeah? I figured he was the lobo who gunned Simms an' Lassiter. Reckon them shields an' guns would about cinch it onto him, huh?"

Sisson chuckled. "Might—if anybody ever found 'em. But I reckon there'll be three instead of two before long. Slash'll be right pleased to get yores to hang alongside the others."

Sisson rose now, still grinning. "I didn't come here to make talk, Barton. That was all accidental. Bringin' you a cup of water an' a little belly-waddin'. Hope you enjoy it—what time you got left."

He walked to the cell door and picked up the battered tray that held a tin cup of water, a bowl of bean soup and a slab of bread. He set it on the box he had just vacated.

"Enjoy yoreself, hombre. I'll be seein' you—down at the big cottonwood tree."

He turned on his heel and shuffled out of the cell door, slamming it behind him. Buck Barton drew a long breath, and a twisted smile quirked the corners of his

mouth for a moment. He had heard a lot in the few minutes Sission had been with him. But little good it would do him.

Swiftly he pieced together what the squat man had told him. First, Jean Ralston was still free, but her man was back at Gratton's hideout. Buck shivered a little as he imagined what the burly outlaw might do to the slim man. There was little doubt but that Jean would be forced back into Gratton's hands.

He had learned for a certainty, too, that Lassiter and Simms had been victims of Slash Gratton's guns—that proof could be found in the outlaw's hideout. But it looked as if he could do nothing about that, either. Sisson had threatened him with mob violence, and he knew it was no idle threat. It seemed that old Tom Durham had sacrificed another deputy to no avail.

Bitterly he cursed the fates—and himself. Just a dumb tenderfoot—riding into danger with his eyes shut—due to swing, and nothing to be done about it. If it wasn't for that hole through his chest, for the weakness that dragged at his legs and body. He slumped back on the bunk, closed his eyes and gave himself over to biting thought.

CHAPTER XII

SHERIFF WRIGHT WONDERS

ON HIS WAY from Buck Barton's cell, Sisson stopped for a moment at Sheriff Wright's battered desk. The grizzled old officer looked up at his deputy, and for the first time doubt crept into his eyes. The tone in which Doc Winters had spoken of back-shooting, the hint of arrogance Sisson had been showing the last few weeks, the way the Tomichi Kid had looked him squarely in the eyes—all these troubled the old sheriff.

The sneering grin was still on Sisson's face. "He was awake, boss," he said. "Tried to talk hisself out of the deal. Still claims he's Buck Barton. But it didn't do no good. He's the Tomichi Kid, right enough—five thousand dollars' worth for me. I'll be plumb pleased to see him dancin' on air."

Sheriff Wright spoke slowly, his words coming from deep in his chest. His eyes held Sisson's. "You say you shot the Kid after he'd tickled yore ear with a bullet."

"Yeah. I give him his chance—an' he missed. " Sisson threw out his chest.

"Then how come—that the Tomichi Kid—was shot through the back?"

Sisson started at these words. The sneering grin faded from his face, and a scowl furrowed his forehead. "You ain't doubtin' my word, Wright? You ain't thinkin' I lied to you?"

Sheriff Wright shook his head. "Not that—yet. Jus' wonderin' is all. But it's kind o' got me puzzled. That—an' other things. It ain't all straight in my mind."

Sisson seemed to gather himself together. He drew a long breath. "If you'd jus' ask me, instead of settin' here ponderin'. It was like I told you—the Tomichi Kid shot first. Then he seen he'd missed—that I had a bead onto him. He ducked his head an' whirled, just as I shot. The bullet got him in the back."

"Yeah—it's possible," Wright grunted, apparently a little relieved.

"Not only possible—it's true. An' now them other things?"

"How come you was out in the high country at jus' the right time? Seems a little too—"

"Didn't aim to tell you that," Sisson growled. "But I got a tip the Tomichi Kid was headed this way. I wanted to collect the reward. Been on the watch for him quite a spell."

Sheriff Wright nodded. "That's possible, too. Mebbe I've been a little upset, Sisson. Sounds reasonable, all of it, the way you tell it."

The furrows ironed themselves out of Sisson's brow, and a relieved sigh came from his lips. "I'm glad to hear you say that, boss. I wouldn't have you think I was double-crossin' you, for nothin'. If I'd have knowed you might look at it this way, I'd shore have told you about the tip."

He turned now and made for the front door. At the threshold, he turned and shot a glance back at Sheriff Wright. The old officer was still staring off into space, a puzzled look on his face. Sisson's teeth clicked as he stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"Gettin' too damn nosy," he muttered to himself. "Have to arrange his shufflin' off, as soon as that C. A. deputy is out of the way."

He hurried his steps now, as he made for the brightly lighted Miner's Rest Saloon. He had work to do, and it must be done quickly. That twisted smile edged back

onto his face. He was smarter than old Wright and the C. A. deputy put together, he told himself. Just a pair of dumb dogies.

In front of the express office, halfway to the saloon, he paused for a second. He saw Link Freeman's lanky frame bent over the scarred desk. A sneer crossed his face. Link Freeman was content to sit there and collect what little splits Slash Gratton was willing to throw his way. Freeman, who had access to information that was worth a hundredfold what Gratton paid. Maybe sometime he might sit in Gratton's place. If that happened, Link Freeman would be a good man to have on his side.

He straightened his shoulders as he turned to the door of the little office. Link Freeman looked up as Sisson entered. A smile without humor wrinkled his thin face.

"You're gettin' to be a right frequent visitor, Sisson," he grunted. "Feller'd think you liked me, or somethin'."

Sisson forced an answering smile to his own face. "I do like you, Freeman. You're the smartest man on the range—exceptin' mebbe me. Some of these days—"

"Yeah. You're figurin' you might take over Slash Gratton's outfit. I been readin' that in yore eyes for a long time. But you ain't got the sand, Sisson. Mebbe the brains—but not the sand."

For an instant red wrath flared up in Sisson's face. His hand stole to the butt of his six-gun. Then he drew it away with an effort. "No reason for you an' me to quarrel, Freeman. You're set, no matter who ramrods the outfit. Anyhow, we got other business to 'tend right now."

"Yeah? What business?"

"The Tomichi Kid has got to swing—before the judge gets to Cobalt. Got to swing tonight!"

"You're talkin' loco, Sisson. If he swings now, that five thousand reward—"

SISSON stepped closer. For a moment he seemed to study over his next words. Then his lips tightened. "I'm tellin' you somethin', Freeman—an' if you breathe it, I'll salivate you personal. The hombre in the jailhouse—ain't the Tomichi Kid!"

Freeman's watery eyes widened, and his ratlike face registered astonishment. For a moment his thin lips writhed before the words would come. "You're—you're shore of it, Sisson? You ain't just imaginin'—"

"I've seen the Tomichi Kid too many times—an' too close—to be fooled. The hombre in the jailhouse is—Buck Barton, Tom Durham's deputy."

"But nobody else knows it, Sisson—the reward—"

"Don't be a damn fool, Freeman. Tom Durham knows—an' so do the law-men down along the line, the hombres who gunned the Tomichi Kid."

"Then what are we goin' to do? We can't—"

"Listen! Buck Barton knows somethin' that Sheriff Wright an' Tom Durham don't. He knows you an' me are hooked up with Slash Gratton. Wright won't listen to him, but—" Sisson's words faded, but a twisted smile without mirth crossed his lips.

Link Freeman drew a long breath. "You mean we got to see that Tom Durham don't see Buck Barton again—alive?"

Sisson nodded. "But we can't gun him—not while he's in the jailhouse. An' we can't bust him loose. He's too shot up to get away."

"Then what—"

"A little hangin' party, Freeman. Nobody can accuse us, if a mob should take a notion to swing him."

"Yeah. That's right—that's a damn good idea." Link Freeman's watery eyes lifted to study Sisson's face. "Reckon mebbe you could sort of start the ball to rollin', huh?"

Sisson shook his head. "Not me, Freeman. Wright is already wonderin'. Jumped me about shootin' Barton in the back. I talked myself out of it, but he ain't plumb satisfied. If I was to start the lynchin' bee, he'd raise plenty hell."

"But you don't mean—"

"You're the hombre to start it, Freeman. You can spread the word around that the Tomichi Kid has cracked plenty express company strong boxes, an' that you think it's a good idea to be sure he swings. A little talk an' plenty of liquor'll do the trick."

Freeman's narrow face paled and his eyes went wide with fear. "I—I can't do that, Sisson. Why, if it'd get to—"

"Rather do it than go to the pen for ten-twenty years, wouldn't you?" Sisson snapped. "You know what'll happen if Tom Durham gets word of the hook-up."

"Yeah—I know." The lanky man rose and paced back and forth across the little office once or twice. Then he faced the squat deputy. "I'll do it—but I'd rather face a whole litter of bob-cats."

"I knowed you would. While you're stirrin' up the crowd in the Miner's Rest, I'll go back to the jailhouse. Want to be alongside ol' Wright when things get to movin'. Want to be shore he don't get too proddy." Sisson winked, and a grin split his face.

"It might not—be such a—bad idea," he said slowly, softly.

"What now?" Freeman asked quietly.

"If Sheriff Wright was to get plugged—all accidental, you know—by some hombre in the mob—then I'd be sheriff. Leastways until next election. You know—I'd kind o' like—bein' sheriff."

"You're a plumb damned fool, Sisson!" Link Freeman exploded. "Someday you're goin' to meet up with a waddy that'll—"

"He ain't showed up—yet," Sisson answered with a humorless laugh.

As Link Freeman shook his head slowly, Sisson turned on his heel and strode from the little office. He was feeling much better. After all, there wasn't a smarter man on the range, he told himself. Talk Freeman into taking all the chance. And that idea of drilling Sheriff Wright—Sisson threw back his shoulders in a swagger as he made for the sheriff's office.

CHAPTER XIII

JUDGE LYNCH

TWENTY or more men were gathered in the Miner's Rest. The air was blue with smoke—reeked of stale liquor and tobacco. News of the Tomichi Kid's capture had spread to the neighboring ranches, and ranchers and punchers had been gathering all evening. The Tomichi Kid's ill fame was widespread, and there was much bitter talk even before Link Freeman showed up.

Men bellied up to the bar, or sat at the card tables. But all of them had glasses in their hands—or in front of them. All—except a slim youngster who looked no more than sixteen years old, sitting almost unnoticed back in the corner. It was a good night for Sol Lanter, owner and bartender of the Miner's Rest.

Link Freeman entered the front door almost reluctantly. He stood just inside for a moment, blinking in the hazy light, his watery eyes strained to make out the crowd. Then he took a hesitant step toward the bar. Lanter saw him—hailed him with upraised hand.

"First drink of the evenin' is on the house, Freeman. After that, every man buys his own."

Link Freeman smiled with stiff lips, and edged up to the scarred oak. Lanter slid a glass and bottle in front of him. Link Freeman poured a stiff shot, and stared at his shaking hand. Then Lanter leaned across the bar, and spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"Have you seen the Tomichi Kid, Freeman? Some of the pokes here ain't plumb shore he's in the jailhouse—don't figure Sisson has got sand enough to swap lead with him."

Link Freeman purposely made his voice louder than necessary. "I saw him, Lanter. It's the Tomichi Kid hisself. There ain't no doubt of that. Sisson has caught the murderin', cow-stealin', stage-robbin' skunk, right enough."

Lanter turned to the crowd. "You hear that, fellers? Link Freeman says Sisson shore enough ketched the Tomichi Kid. I've always tol' you that Sheriff Wright wouldn't hire no deputy that wasn't—"

A man whom Link Freeman recognized as Burke Talbot of the Box O spread, stepped forward and broke in on Sol Lanter's words. "I wouldn't trust Sisson's words for nothin'—but if Freeman says the Tomichi Kid is jailed, I'm willin' to take his word for it." Then his face twisted into a scowl. "All I'm sore about is that Sisson didn't kill him while he had the chance."

Freeman shot a narrow-eyed look at the tall cow-puncher. He saw the whisky-recklessness in the man's eyes, caught the burr of a liquor-thickened tongue in his words. He swept the rest of the crowd. All had been drinking plenty. A smile flicked his lips. Didn't look like it was going to be so hard, after all.

"Yeah—too bad," he said softly. "But you know how it is with lawmen. They've got the crazy idea that they'd ought to let the law take its course. Figure that if the Tomichi Kid needs hangin', the law'll do it."

Another puncher, Slim Bisbee from the Turkey Track, broke in. "Yeah—but you know Judge Thorpe. He won't hang nobody. Send him up for a spell, mebbe—but no hangin'." There was a note of disgust in the man's voice.

Link Freeman nodded slowly. "You're

right, Bisbee. Likely the Tomichi Kid, in spite of his killin' an' robbin', won't get no more'n five years. Not much pay for what he's done."

The slim sixteen-year-old back in the corner had risen from his chair now, and edged close to the crowd gathered near Link Freeman and the bartender. His face was white and his eyes were wide as he listened. Then Freeman looked at Burke Talbot, smiled crookedly as the puncher opened his mouth.

"Looks to me like we'd ought to vote Thorpe out o' his job. A yaller-livered ol' coot like him ain't got no business decidin' what the Tomichi Kid has got comin' to him."

"Just what I was thinkin'." Link Freeman answered softly. "But that ain't changin' this case none. The Kid'll be out in five years, an'—"

SLIM BISBEE was blinking with a half-drunken idea, and the words spluttered from his lips. "Mebbe Thorpe won't hang him—but there's rope in Cobalt—an' a big cottonwood tree out at the edge of town."

"Now, Bisbee," Link Freeman began, raising his hand. "You don't mean—"

"He means a lynchin' bee, that's what he means," a thick voice from back in the crowd bellowed. "An' personal, I like the idea. Time to show long-riders like the Tomichi Kid that the Cobalt Valley ain't no healthy place to hang out."

Link Freeman edged back, ducking his head to hide the grin of satisfaction. It had been easier than he hoped. Didn't cost him a cent for liquor—and Sol Lanter or any of the men in the crowd could stand witness that he had tried to talk them out of the lynching.

Back at the door now, he stopped and listened. Talk was growing louder, more boisterous. At the minute the crowd was arguing about how best to get started. Some of the more sober were still not quite in favor of the deal, but they were half-hearted in their protests.

One or two thought that they should get Sheriff Wright out of the way before they started—but were not quite sure how to do it. At last Burke Talbot raised his voice above the others.

"We aim to string the Tomichi Kid to the big cottonwood. We're all agreed to that. He's got it comin' to him, an' we know damned well Thorpe won't sentence him to hangin'. Am I right?"

A chorus of agreement rose from the throng. The slim boy's face was white as paper now, and his eyes were big and frightened. He slipped back from the crowd, opened the back door and sped out into the night. No one saw him go—or paid him any heed if they did glimpse him.

Talbot was speaking again. "Sheriff Wright is smart. He ain't goin' to kick up no fuss when he sees us comin' after the Tomichi Kid. Nobody'd expect him to try to stop us. He ain't no damn fool."

"Yeah, Burke's right!" Bisbee chimed in. "Wright's smart. Let's get to movin'. Somebody get a rope! You, Burke—bring yore hoss—an' you, Wartels, be shore—"

Link Freeman's twisted grin widened still more. He backed out of the door onto the slab sidewalk. For just a little he peered through the door, watching the growing excitement in the crowd. Then he whirled and sped across the street and down to his own little office.

Once inside, he drew a quavering breath of relief. He turned his chair so he could watch out of the window, and hunched low, his eyes upon the Miner's Rest. As the minutes dragged like hours, he began to feel more than a hint of uneasiness. But at last the front door of the Miner's Rest Saloon seemed to explode a score or more men.

Link Freeman grinned and rubbed his thin hands. Luck was with him—and with Sisson and Slash Gratton, too. It had been easier than he imagined it could be. Just a word or two, and the mob had started. His narrow shoulders squared. Even Sisson and Gratton would have to agree that he was plenty slick.

The crowd of men milled for a few minutes in front of the saloon, and Link Freeman could hear their high-pitched voices. He shot a look down the street toward the little jail. A single light flickered behind the one window. Sheriff Wright was down there—but so was Sisson. There'd be no trouble when the mob showed up. He looked back at the saloon. The mob was on the move now, grim and intent.

"Goodbye, Buck Barton!" Link Freeman breathed. "You had me fooled for a spell—but I'm even with you now!"

CHAPTER XIV

AUNT MOLLY CARTER

A SLIM form darted through the darkness, threading its way between buildings and ramshackle shacks. A white face framed a pair of wide, frightened eyes. Pale lips moved in soundless words. A single light twinkled out at the edge of Cobalt, and the slender figure scurried like a frightened rabbit for it.

The darting figure did not wait to open the gate in the low picket fence—a hand on one picket, and it sailed over. Feet thudded swiftly on the gravel walk that led up to the trim little slab and stone house—padded on the narrow porch.

Inside, a trim little old woman heard the sounds—rose swiftly from the chair in which she had been sitting tense and alert. Her face was lined with the marks of age, and her thick hair was snow white. Steel-rimmed spectacles framed a pair of bright blue eyes. Thin lips were tight and straight.

The door swung open, and the slender figure darted inside. For a moment a pair of eyes strangely like the woman's blinked in the lamplight. The woman glided forward.

"Jimmie! What happened up there? What has Sisson—"

"Sisson wasn't there, Aunt Molly! I watched for him—listened to the talk, but he didn't show up. But the mob has started, just the same. It was like you said it would be—except for Sisson—"

"Who did start it, Jimmie? Who?"

"Didn't seem like—nobody, really—" The slim boy paused a second. "Link Freeman came in—talked a little—said he recognized the Tomichi Kid. An' then the mob—"

"Link Freeman! I might have known that slinking—"

The door from the back room crashed open. The little old woman turned swiftly. The boy's words stopped dead. A look of compassion swept across the woman's lined face as she took a step forward.

"Jean, honey—you—you heard? You know what's—"

Jean Ralston came into the room swiftly now. Her face was white and drawn, but her lips were straight and firm—her eyes flashing. "I heard, Aunt Molly! Sisson and Link Freeman have stirred up a mob to lynch the Tomichi Kid! They can't do it, Aunt Molly! They can't!"

The little old woman shook her head. "There's nothing we can do, honey. We're just two women and a boy against twenty-thirty bloodthirsty men!" Her eyes turned toward a filled gun-belt and holster hanging from a peg on the wall. "If Carter was alive—if he was with us—"

"They're not going to hang him, Aunt Molly! I don't care if he is a killer—a road-agent! I don't care who or what he is! He treated me like a gentleman—he tried to get Bob away from Slash Gratton's outfit. I'm not going to let them—"

"You can't help yourself, Jean," the old woman said sadly. "There's nothing we can say or do—"

Jean Ralston's brown eyes, suddenly narrowed and her white hands clenched tightly. She whirled toward the white-faced boy. "Saddle your paint horse, Jimmie—quick! Hurry, Jimmie! Hurry!"

The boy hesitated for just a split second while he looked at the little woman. She nodded, her eyes misty. The boy darted from the room. Now Jean Ralston turned swiftly to the gun-belt on the wall. She lifted it down with firm hands—buckled it around her own waist.

"It's loaded, Aunt Molly? Loaded and ready?" Her voice was ominously soft and even.

The woman nodded. "It's always been loaded, every minute since Carter—since he went away." Then she seemed to realize what was in Jean's mind. "But you can't face them down, Jean! They'll laugh at you—and in the end they'll get him!"

"Maybe they will, Aunt Molly!" the slim girl said swiftly. "But I can try! I've got an idea—"

The thud of hoofs sounded just outside. Jean Ralston did not finish her words. She darted past the little old woman and out onto the porch. The boy's white face was a pasty blob in the darkness. The spots on the saddled paint horse showed up plainly.

"Good work, Jimmie!" Jean breathed.

She swung into the saddle with practiced speed, gathered up the reins, and touched the horse with her heels. The animal leaped into a run. At the fence, shining whitely in the darkness, she lifted and the horse went over like a trained hunter.

Jean Ralston's eyes swept the little town. Only three or four lighted buildings pushed through the darkness—the Miner's

Rest, the express office, the saddle shop—and the sheriff's office. She drew a quick breath, and a shiver chased itself up and down her spine.

For the mob was nearing the combination office and jail. Already the leaders were almost in front of the squat building, and the stragglers were coming in quickly.

"Hold them off for a little while, Sheriff Wright! Just for a little while!" she breathed.

IT WAS almost a quarter of a mile to the jail, and Jean Ralston sent the paint horse at top speed, blessing her stars that there were only one or two shacks in her path. She swept around the dark little structures, never slackening pace.

As she rode, her right hand fumbled with the coil of saddle rope at the horn. The thongs were stubborn, but before she had covered more than half the distance she had unfastened them. Now she leaned closer over the saddle horn, and urged the animal to a still swifter pace.

She could hear loud voices from in front of the jail, as she swung the horse off the trail and made for the rear. Her lips set tight and every nerve and muscle tensed as she caught snatches of the loud words at the front. Sheriff Wright was arguing stubbornly with the mob leaders. If only he could hold out for a little longer—

She knew just where the window of the Tomichi Kid's cell was located. Jimmie had pointed it out to her, and she had been watching it from the little house all afternoon. She made straight for it, pulling up beside the barred opening. Sitting her saddle, her shoulders were almost on the level with the little window. She leaned out from her saddle just a little, and grasped an iron bar.

For an instant her eyes were glued to the dimly lit square. She was almost afraid to look closer. Then she steeled herself and leaned out until the cold bars brushed her cheeks. At first the interior of the little cell was shrouded in gloom. But in a moment she could pick out the scanty furnishings—the bunk, the box and the single chair.

Then a gasp came from her lips. The bunk was empty! Perhaps old Sheriff Wright had already given up. But, no, the sound of voices, growing louder and angrier, came from out front. She looked closer, her brown eyes narrowed and intent.

She drew in a long, quavering breath. For a form squatted beside the barred door—a man who seemed to have his ear to the slabs—a grimly silent, motionless figure.

"He's on his feet!" she breathed. "He's not dying—he's not flat on his back in the bunk!"

Her lips parted. A word, low but distinct, filtered through the bars. "Tomichi! Tomichi Kid!"

The squatting form straightened with a jerk. An involuntary grunt that was more than half groan came from Buck Barton's pain-twisted lips. His hand streaked for his hip as he whirled—but came away empty as he realized that he was unarmed.

Then Jean Ralston spoke again with desperate haste. "Tomichi! Here! Come here, quick! Onto the bunk!"

And as she spoke, she was working swiftly with the rope. One end was knotted tightly around two of the bars. The other, short-snubbed, she dallied around the saddle horn. Now she straightened in her saddle—backed the paint horse quickly.

Jimmie had trained the animal well. It leaned back against the tightening rope. The rope creaked and groaned as the hemp stretched dangerously. Jean Ralston held her breath as she breathed a desperate hope that the strands would hold. Now a crackling sound from the bars, imbedded in the stone of the jail wall.

She urged the paint horse to further effort. A sliver of stone broke from the lower end of one bar—then a larger piece. Then the iron bar jerked free with a sudden snap, throwing all the weight of the paint horse on the other.

"Back, Pedro! Back!" Jean Ralston breathed.

Now the other bar gave way suddenly. The straining horse stumbled backward another step before the girl could gain control. Then she touched the animal with her heels—swung it up against the jail wall beneath the window. She leaned close. Buck Barton was standing on the bunk, his hands on the sill of the window.

"Can you make it, Tomichi? Can you crawl through?"

Buck Barton did not answer in words. It had all happened so quickly—the roar of the mob—Sheriff Wright's dogged refusal to admit them—the voice at the window, a voice that he recognized instantly. Then

the rope that tore the bars from their sockets. It all left the wounded man breathless.

But now, with that gaping hole where the bars had been looming in front of his very eyes, he summoned every ounce of his strength. Just a few minutes before, it had been all he could do to heave himself from his bunk. But the excitement—the sudden hope—sent a surge of renewed strength through his veins.

He grasped the window ledge more firmly, tested his muscles by a short lift. The wound in his chest was grim agony, but he did not flinch. His toes found the unevenness of the stone wall, and helped hoist his body up. First his head, then his shoulders and chest. As his weight came down on his gaping wound, a groan left his lips unbidden. He heard Jean gasp, outside.

HE FORCED a chuckle to hide that groan. He heaved still harder—wriggled his body through the narrow opening. Jean Ralston's hands caught him by the shoulder—pulled him desperately. Now he was clear of the cell, and stretched across the saddle.

Without waiting for him to straighten, the girl whirled the horse and dug her heels into its ribs. The jolting was deadly agony to Buck Barton, and he felt his head swirling, his senses leaving him. He must have swooned, for he never remembered that desperate ride.

Jean Ralston held the inert body across the saddle with every ounce of strength she could summon. As the paint horse raced out into the darkness, she could hear the howl of the mob change from one of deadly wrath to grim triumph. She urged the paint horse to a faster spurt of speed.

Now the low picket fence loomed ahead. She lifted the animal over it again, just as still another change swept the tone of the mob. Now it was the roar of a beast robbed of its prey—a deadly, terrifying sound. Jean Ralston caught her breath. She had not been a dozen seconds too soon.

She pulled the paint horse to a sliding stop at the very edge of the porch. The little old woman was standing there, and beside her the slim boy. Jean slid from the saddle, still holding the draped form across the horse's back.

"I—got—him, Aunt Molly! He's—here on—the saddle!"

The woman was beside the girl now, her movements swift but steady—her voice firm. "We'll lift him down, Jean! Steady, girl! Didn't you ever help handle a wounded man—or a dead one?"

"I—never—"

The little woman broke in again. "Take Pedro, Jimmie! Quick! Get him into the stable—and his saddle off. They may be here any minute!"

Then back to Jean Ralston again. "You take his feet, Jean! I'll handle his head. We'll carry him into Carter's—into the spare room."

CHAPTER XV

DEATH COMES CLOSE

BUCK BARTON had only a hazy sense of what was happening. His eyes did open a crack, as the light of the lamp in the trim little house shone full upon the lids. Everything danced and shimmered. He could make out nothing plainly—not even the face of that slim form who tugged at his feet.

He was being carried—he knew that much. And slowly he was beginning to remember. The jail—the mob at the front door. His first taste of desperate fear, as the crowd howled for his life. Then the voice at the window. His heart thumped against his ribs.

The voice at the window! He knew that voice! Suddenly he knew that it had not been out of his ears since that night in the little log cabin in the hills. That soft, almost husky voice of Jean Ralston, the outlaw's woman. It was her voice—there could be no other like it.

He opened his eyes wide now, but darkness surrounded him. A door had closed upon the lighted room. Then he caught another voice—crisp, quick, but feminine and musical.

"Lay his feet on the bed, honey—then help me with his head! Quick! We've no time to lose!"

"Where—what—" Buck Barton forced the whisper from his lips.

"No talking now!" the last voice said again. "Plenty of time for that later."

He felt himself placed none too gently upon his back—knew that the softest bed he had ever touched was beneath him. One of the pair turned from him toward the door. The other hesitated for just a second. Then he felt something recognizable

thrust into his limp hand. His fingers closed instinctively over the butt of a six gun.

Lips brushed his ear. Whispered words reached him. "It's loaded, Tomichi Kid!" That soft, husky voice again. Jean Ralston's.

The shadowy form glided away—the door closed softly. For a long minute, Buck Barton's heart beat so fast that he could hardly breathe for its pounding. That voice seemed to linger in his ear—to soothe him and excite him at the same time. "Jean!" He whispered the name over and over.

But now slowly the agony in his chest was abating. His brain was clearing and clear memory was returning. And with that memory came bitter thoughts to plague him. Jean Ralston—outlaw's woman—a member of the outfit he had come two hundred miles to hunt down—the chosen of the leader of that lobo pack.

He should despise her—he knew that. But instead he despised himself for loving her. For that's what it was. He had never experienced it before—but he knew. He knew, too, that he had been fighting against the same love ever since the first moment he had seen the glints deep in her soft brown eyes, there in front of the fireplace in the little cabin.

"It'd been better if she'd left me there in the jailhouse," he told himself bitterly. "Left me there to swing—instead of draggin' me down here where I'll be—"

Down here! His eyes narrowed there in the soft darkness of the room. What was she doing here in Cobalt? If she had kept her promise to him—if she had stayed in the cabin, or even have ridden north toward the Anchor spread, he could have understood. But here—in Cobalt—

Suddenly his thoughts were jerked clear of all those things that puzzled him, and brought back to the grim and understandable present. For the pound of hoofs sounded outside the little house—then the crunch of booted feet on the gravel.

Soft but excited voices, the words blurred by the wall, reached Buck Barton. Then the pad of hurrying feet. The door swung open silently. Buck's eyes turned to the oblong of ruddy light—saw Jean Ralston's slim figure in bold relief against the light—caught the glints in her thick hair where the light touched it.

The little old woman spoke from behind the girl, her words urgent. "You stay there, Jean—no matter what happens! Nobody must see you—nobody must know you're here! Mind now, not a word—not a sound!"

Jean Ralston half turned. "But Aunt Molly, they must have seen me riding away from the jail with the Tomichi Kid—must have seen me coming this way! They may—may—"

"They'll not harm me." The woman's voice was firm. "Reckon they'll know better than to touch Jack Carter's widow. They know I have friends—plenty of them to—"

Her words broke off short, as heavy feet pounded the little porch. A knock clattered stridently on the door. A harsh voice called: "Molly Carter! It's the law, Molly Carter! Open up!"

For a moment afterwards, there was dead silence. Then the little old woman answered crisply. "I'm coming, Sisson. Don't get in such a hurry. I'm not used to being bothered at this time of night."

Jean Ralston moved softly into the room, and pulled the door closed silently behind her. Velvety darkness blotted out her slender figure, and Buck Barton drew a long, quavering breath. He felt, rather than heard the girl glide toward him. Then her hand reached out and touched him. He reached up and grasped her hand tightly.

"Sisson's out there—the man who gunned me from behind! An' I've got this six-gun you slipped me—"

"Sh-h-h!" the girl warned softly. "He mustn't know you're here—mustn't know—"

The outside door opened now, and the words drifted through the thin wall to the tense man and girl in the dark room. The little old woman spoke first.

"Why are you here, Sisson? What crooked work has brought you to my door at night?"

A snarling curse came from the deputy—words and tone that sent the hot blood coursing through Buck Barton's veins—that tightened his grip on Jean Ralston's hand, bringing a gasp of pain from her lips. She leaned close—whispered desperately in his ear.

"Steady, Tomichi Kid! Steady!"

Then Sisson's rasping answer. "You know why I'm here, Molly Carter! It won't do you no good to try to lie out of it! You'd just as well tell me where he is!"

The little woman answered him evenly, but there was a thread of disgust and hatred in her voice. "You're a crook—and a

coward, Sisson. You'd never dare to call me a liar if Jack Carter were here—if any man was here. Sheriff Wright didn't send you. He doesn't know you're here. And when I tell him that you broke in on me—"

A snarling laugh was her answer. The man's heavy feet thumped the floor, as he strode into the room. Buck Barton tried to sit up in his bed, but Jean Ralston's steady hand pushed him back down.

"He came here! Came on your nephew's paint horse! I saw that spotted horse headed this way on the dead run, just before we knew he had broken out of jail."

"Do you mean to tell me Jimmie's horse was in jail, Sisson? You're suddenly going loco."

"Don't try to get smart on me!" Sisson barked. "You know what I mean. You or Jimmie Carter helped the Tomichi Kid break jail—brought him here to your house—hiding him here!"

"The Tomichi Kid? He's the man you shot from behind, isn't he?" the little old woman asked softly. "And now he's broken jail. I wouldn't be in your boots for anything, Sisson."

AGAIN that snarl. "You're talking in circles. I did gun him down—in fair fight. An' I can do it again. But now he's on the loose, an' I aim to take him back to jail—to face the law he's broken. You're hiding him here, an' I've come for him. Where is he?"

"You're not trying to make out that I'd have a man in my house—alone, Sisson? Unless he broke in at the point of a gun—like you did."

"The law is back of me! I'm searching the house!" Sisson snapped.

"You have a warrant, I suppose?" the little woman asked mildly.

"Don't need a warrant. He's an escaped prisoner—an' I want him. Out of my way. I'm lookin' your house over!"

The two in the dark little room could hear Molly Carter's feet shuffle backward toward their door, as Sisson advanced toward her. Then they knew she had her back to it, facing Sisson desperately. She raised her voice a little.

"You're not searching this house. You have no right. There's no one here—except me and—and a friend—a girl who is sick—desperately sick. She's in this room, and I'll not have her disturbed."

"A girl, huh?" Sisson's raspy voice held a mirthless chuckle. "So you're not alone! So you've got a—a girl with you—a sick girl?" His heavy feet shuffled toward the door. "I'll take a look at her, Molly Carter. Mebbe I can do somethin' for her. I'm not so bad with—sick girls."

Jean Ralston leaned close to Buck Barton's ear. "She's trying to tell us what to do, Tomichi Kid! Don't you see what—"

But already Buck had loosed his hold on the girl's hand, and clutched the butt of the six gun she had placed beside him. Now he was rolling silently toward the back of the bed, where it was out some eight or ten inches from the wall. With only a soft thud, he dropped to the floor and rolled back under the bed.

He could hear Jean Ralston crawl swiftly beneath the blankets above him. He could hear her breath coming fast—could almost picture the fear on her face. Then the door opened, as Sisson swept the sputtering little woman to one side and stood in the opening. A streak of red light painted the floor, edged toward Buck Barton beneath the bed.

"You've no business coming into a girl's sick room, Sisson! You've no business in my house at all! When I tell Sheriff Wright what you've done—"

"When you tell him, I'll have the Tomichi Kid back in his cell!" Sisson growled, as he turned and lifted the oil lamp from the little table.

Now he was back in the doorway, holding the lamp high and peering into the shadowy room. A soft chuckle came from his lips, as he saw the covered form on the bed. He strode toward it, the little woman trying to hold him back.

His free hand darted out and jerked the covers down a little way. A curse bubbled from his lips as he saw Jean Ralston's white face staring up at him. Then the curse changed to a low, mirthless laugh.

"A sick girl, huh? So this is where you've been hidin'—this is where you've—"

"Hiding from whom?" The little gray-haired woman's voice was sharp and brittle. "What do you mean, Sisson? Do you know my friend, Jean Ralston?"

"Do I know—" He stopped, the smile suddenly fading from his face as it sud-

denly dawned upon him just what he was saying. "Jean—Ralston? Seems like I've heard the name somewheres—ain't plumb shore." He was feeling his way cautiously now. "But this here gal—for a minute she reminded me of—of someone I'd seen down along the border. An outlaw's woman—or—or somethin'."

"You've not seen her along the border, Sisson! And she's not an outlaw's woman. She's a sick girl—and a friend of mine. Now you've seen for yourself, I'll thank you to leave my house."

Still muttering and grumbling, Sisson backed out of the room. Buck Barton, from beneath the bed, could see his booted toes as he backed. A smile without humor flitted across his tight lips. The little woman followed the deputy sheriff, and after a moment the door closed.

Still silent and motionless, Buck could hear the man moving around in the other room—could hear the kitchen door open—then slam shut. He could catch a few words, but they were disconnected and meaningless. Then, after a tense five minutes, the front door slammed viciously.

Buck Barton still lay beneath the bed another few minutes, and the girl above him did not move. Then the thud of hoofs told them that Sisson had ridden away. Buck rolled carefully out from his cover, and staggered to his feet. He was surprised to find that he could stand without too much pain—that his wound did not bother him nearly so much as it had a while before.

He heard the rustle of the bed covers, and in a scant second Jean Ralston stood beside him, her hand touching his arm. He laughed softly, as his hand sought hers.

"Aunt Molly Carter is a brave woman—an' a smart one, Jean. I can never repay her for what she's done. I don't think I've ever—"

"She'll not ask for pay, Tomichi Kid. It was pay enough for her to outwit Sisson. She hates him—for she knows him. It was Sisson who killed Jack Carter, Aunt Molly's husband—although she can't prove it. He was shot down when he tried to drive rustlers from his herd. It's been five years, but Aunt Molly will never forget—never stop trying to find the proof she needs."

"Then there's still another reason for me to get the goods on that hombre!" Buck Barton said grimly.

CHAPTER XVI

JEAN RALSTON'S MAN

FOR a little while the man and the girl stood silently there in the dark room. Buck's heart beat fast and high at the very nearness of Jean Ralston, although he tried to convince himself that he was locoed—that he could not love a girl who trailed with Slash Gratton's pack—who was an outlaw's woman. It was no use. Try as she would, he knew that something had come into his heart. Something that would never leave it—would never give him a moment's rest or peace.

The door opened softly. For just a second the little gray-haired woman stood framed in the oblong of light. It seemed to Buck that she stood straighter, that there was a proud look on her lined face—that her eyes twinkled with unusual brightness. Then she slipped into the room, and closed the door behind her. She advanced toward the pair, her hands outstretched in front of her. They touched Buck and Jean.

"Sit down—the two of you," she said evenly. "There on the bed. We've talking to do—plans to make."

Wordlessly, Buck Barton and Jean Ralston obeyed. The little woman stood in front of them. Suddenly she had assumed the leadership. Her voice was crisp and steady.

"We got rid of Sisson. He'll not look here for the Tomichi Kid again. But now that he knows you are here, Jean—"

"I know, Aunt Molly," Jean Ralston said softly, hesitantly. "Now that he knows I am here, he'll tell Slash Gratton—and Gratton will—"

"You're in as much danger as the Tomichi Kid," the little woman broke in. "I had hoped you'd be here—safe—until this mess was all cleared up. But we couldn't help it. And now—"

"Now I'll have to leave, Aunt Molly. Have to go somewhere—where Slash Gratton will not look—where—"

"But your man—in Slash Gratton's outfit—you can't—" Buck Barton had to force the words from his tight lips.

"Her man?" There was a startled tone in Molly Carter's voice. "What are you talking about?"

"He—means—" Jean Ralston began.

"I mean her man—Bob!" Buck's voice was raspy and hard.

"Her—" A short, mirthless laugh came from Molly Carter's lips. "Her man—is—her brother, Bob Ralston."

"Bob—is her—brother?" Buck's voice was high-pitched, breathless. His eyes blinked in the darkness as if he had been clubbed. "Then Bob is not her—"

"He's not her man, if that's what you mean," the little woman answered crisply. "Bob is a likable boy—but weak in body and in will. When Jean chooses a man—he'll be a man."

"I'm—I'm sorry—for thinkin'—I didn't know—" Buck Barton stumbled over the words.

"I don't know what difference it should make to you," Jean Ralston said bitterly. "Why should a man with the reputation of the Tomichi Kid censure me for choosing a road-agent—even Slash Gratton himself?"

Buck Barton's hand went out—grasped her arm with a painful grip. His voice was low but intense. "Listen, Jean Ralston—an' Molly Carter! I'm carryin' the Tomichi Kid's reputation—but I'm not the Tomichi Kid. My name is really Buck Barton!"

"But the 'wanted' circular—the things you said to me in the cabin—your hook-up with Slash Gratton—"

In swift, terse words Buck Barton explained. Both women listened silently, but his low-voiced statements made Jean Ralston's heart beat faster, brought a flush to her face. And a little smile played around the corner of Molly Carter's lips.

When he had finished, Jean began hesitantly: "You're telling us these things—when you still think I'm—"

"You and Molly Carter saved my life," Buck said flatly. "Why should I think you'd betray me after that?"

The little old woman smiled just a little wider. "Are you sure that's the reason, boy? It couldn't be that Jean—"

JEAN RALSTON broke in quickly. "Bob isn't a member of Slash Gratton's outfit—really," she said. "Slash Gratton wanted—wanted—"

"He wanted Jean," Molly Carter said sharply. "Just as well put it straight. He saw Jean—wanted her. He thought that she'd follow Bob—and he terrorized the boy into trailing with him. He guessed right—Jean did stay with Bob. There was no other way to save the boy from harm."

Buck Barton turned to the girl in the half darkness. "Jean—I'm—I'm sorry an' ashamed that I—"

The little woman came closer, and her voice was almost bitingly sharp. "You two young ones have wasted enough time. We've plans to make! You've got to figure out what you're going to do now—where you're going, to keep away from Sisson."

"There's one place!" Buck Barton said swiftly. "One place that he'll never think of looking. One place that we can be safe for a little while, at least. And a little while is all I need."

"Why are you keeping it to yourself, then?" Molly Carter demanded.

"The little log cabin up in the high country—the cabin where I took Jean."

"But Sisson knows about it—knows the trail there!" Jean said.

"He does, shore—but he'll never imagine that we'll go back there. He'll be expectin' us to head north toward the Anchor—not back toward Slash Gratton's hideout."

"I believe the boy's right," Molly Carter broke in before Jean could answer. "Sisson is tricky—and he'll be looking for tricks in other folks. Heading back to the cabin will seem plain dumb to him, and he'll give you credit for more sense than that."

"But I don't know—" Jean began.

Buck Barton rose from the bed shakily, and drew Jean Ralston to her feet after him. "Then it's settled. No use waitin'—the quicker we start, the sooner we'll be clear of Cobalt—an' Sisson."

The little old woman turned on her heel. "I'll have Jimmie saddle the paint horse. He'll carry double—you proved that, coming from the jail."

While Molly Carter sped in search of the boy, Jean Ralston rolled a few things in a blanket. Buck Barton walked back and forth across the little room, testing his strength. And he thanked his strong, clean body that his wound was already beginning to heal—that he could move without too much agony.

In a scant five minutes Molly Carter was back. "Jimmie's putting the gear on the paint. Be ready in a few minutes." She leaned forward, looking into Buck Barton's eyes. "You strong enough to ride, Buck Barton? Think you can make it to the cabin?"

Buck laughed shortly. "Nigh as good as new. Don't need to worry none about us, Aunt Molly."

Molly Carter's eyes softened at his un-

conscious use of "Aunt." A smile flicked her lips, but in a second she was stern again. "And you'll take good care of Jean? You'll not—not—"

Buck Barton was sober now, and there was a light in his eyes that the little old woman at least could read—and understand. "As long as I live, Jean Ralston will be safe!"

Molly Carter nodded slowly. "I believe you, boy—and I trust you."

"Thanks, Aunt Molly."

Then the soft plop of hoofs came from outside. The little old woman went into the front room quickly—blew out the lamp. Then she was back at the door where Buck and Jean stood.

"Be careful, children. Watch close—for Sisson is tricky and merciless. Take the back trail out of Cobalt, and don't stop until you're safe in the cabin."

"We'll be careful, Aunt Molly," Jean Ralston said shakily.

Buck Barton spoke quickly. "As soon as I'm strong enough—as soon as this hole through my chest heals up, I'll be back. There's something due to happen, but we can't stop it now. If we tried, it would only mean more killing. We'll have to let things take their course, an' straighten out the kinks afterward."

"What do you mean, boy?" Molly Carter asked quickly.

"No time to explain now. Just set tight an' don't worry about us. No matter what happens, don't let on that you know anything about us."

"I'll not worry about you—but I will worry Sisson—a heap," the little old woman said sturdily. "I aim to tell Sheriff Wright just what—"

"Don't!" Buck broke in. "Don't say anything to Sheriff Wright until after you hear from us! Promise me that!"

"All right, boy," Molly Carter answered reluctantly. "But I've got a lot that's spoiling to be told."

Buck Barton and Jean Ralston were at the front door now. Outside they could make out the shadowy form of the boy, holding the reins. The white spots on the paint horse were blobs in the gloom.

"Goodbye, Aunt Molly," Buck said softly.

"Thank you, Aunt Molly—for everything," Jean Ralston whispered. "I can never repay you for what you've done—"

"You children get along with you," the little old woman said with a telltale note of huskiness in her voice.

They crossed the porch, Jean Ralston steadying Buck Barton with a firm grip on his arm. He climbed into the saddle, and she swung up behind. Jimmie loosed his hold and Buck touched the paint with his heels. In a short minute the little square of light told them that Molly Carter had relighted the lamp. That was all that was visible of the little house. Then that, too, faded in the darkness.

CHAPTER XVII

MAN IN THE CABIN

FOR a long while Buck Barton and Jean Ralston rode into the darkness silently. Her arms were around his waist, steadying him in the saddle. Her face brushed his broad shoulders—her hair on the back of his neck sent little shivers up and down his spine.

Once or twice she shot a glance back over her shoulder. The twinkling lights of Cobalt were receding gradually, as they climbed higher into the tumbled hills. At first both listened for hoofbeats that would tell of pursuit, but none came. Then the lights entirely disappeared. Now velvety blackness—the blackness of a star-sprinkled night sky—enveloped them.

Buck Barton did not remember ever having noticed that the air was so soft and soothing, that the whisper of the breeze through the trees was so musical, that the star-sprinkled sky was so worth looking at. And never had his heart pounded so at his ribs, never had he tingled like this at the feel of a pair of arms around him.

He didn't quite understand it. Why should a pair of brown eyes and two red lips—an oval face and a pile of brown hair—a lithe, graceful body evoke such feelings in him? Why should they change the feel of the air and the look of the sky? Why should they make him feel so awkward and so tongue-tied? He shrugged his shoulders as if to shake off that feeling.

"Are—are you all right, Buck? Your chest—it's not—" Jean Ralston's whisper brushed his ear.

"Feelin'—great—Jean," he said softly. "Never felt better in my life."

For still another mile or more they did not speak again. The hills were becoming steeper now, and the trail more twisting

and treacherous. Buck Barton gave the paint horse its head, reining it back only when he knew it was drifting off the dim trail.

Then he pulled up on the flat rim of Skull Canyon, close to the spot where he had snaked Jean from her saddle with his rope that day— A short chuckle came from his lips as he realized that only three days had passed since that time. He felt the girl move behind him—caught her soft voice.

"What are you laughing at, Buck Barton? Are you remembering—"

Buck nodded. "It's funny, ain't it? Three days ago you were one of Slash Gratton's outfit, an' I was the Tomichi Kid. An' now—"

"And now?" she prompted softly.

"Now we're ridin' together, back to the cabin. This time we know that you're Jean Ralston, an' I'm—"

"You're—Buck—Barton—a lawman."

Buck shook his head slightly. "I'm Buck Barton—a man who—who has found the—only girl in the world—who can make—"

Jean drew a long, quavering breath. "I think we'd better be moving on, Buck. I'll not feel entirely safe until we're inside the cabin."

"Yes—we'd better be—moving on."

The paint horse plunged into a still steeper trail now, rounding huge boulders, threading its way through tangled timber and over jagged ridges. It dipped down into a shallow draw and up the other slope. The shadowy outline of the little cabin loomed directly ahead.

Another twenty yards. Buck Barton pulled to a halt. "I'd better go ahead first, Jean—to see if everything's clear—to see that nobody's—"

"We'll both go, Buck." Jean Ralston slid from behind Buck. Then her hand steadied him as he dismounted. For a moment he stood swaying dizzily. At last he shook the haze from his brain, and started stiffly toward the little cabin, leading the paint horse behind.

The cabin was dark and silent. Not a movement—not a sound. The two circled it, stopping to listen and look every few yards. Then they approached the front door, ground-anchoring the paint horse close. Buck's right hand clutched the butt of the six-gun Jean Ralston had given him back at Molly Carter's. His left found the latch—lifted it.

The door creaked open. For a moment Buck stood in the dark opening, his eyes striving to pierce the gloom. Jean Ralston crowded close at his back. Still no sound or movement. He took a stiff-legged step inside, Jean at his heels. Then he stopped short.

There was a faint warmth in the room—and an elusive scent that he could not quite make out at first. He blinked in the darkness, his hand tightening on the butt of his six-gun. Jean Ralston had sensed the warmth and the smell, too. He knew that by her quickly drawn breath and her tightening clutch on his arm.

HE took another silent forward step, his shoulders hunched forward. His knee struck the edge of a chair seat, sending it sliding ahead with a rasping clatter. He stiffened swiftly. That chair should not have been there. Its place was over in front of the fireplace. He knew it had been in its accustomed place when he visited the cabin last with Bob Ralston.

He froze, but the six-gun in his hand swung up silently. For a moment the silence was almost painful after the clatter of the chair. He was almost ready to take another step, when a flurry of movement came from over at the bunk. A voice, thin and high with fear, came out of the darkness.

"Get yore hands up, hombre! I see you—I'll—I'll drill you if you don't reach!"

Jean Ralston's clutch on Buck Barton's arm tightened still more. Her gasp reached his ears. His finger began to squeeze the trigger, as he swung the muzzle of his gun toward the bunk. But it, too, froze. For now he recognized that voice—knew where he had heard it before.

"Bob!" he said sharply. "Bob Ralston! Don't trigger yore gun! Steady, feller! It's—it's Buck Barton—an' yore sister!"

Buck and Jean heard the sobbing breath of the unseen man—could picture his white face and wide, fear-filled eyes. Then Jean spoke softly, reassuringly.

"It's me—Jean. Don't shoot, Bob."

Another half dozen seconds of silence. Then what was almost a whimper from the bunk. "Jean? It is you—you ain't—"

"It's all right, Bob. Put up your gun. Buck is going to light the lamp."

"Don't! Don't light the lamp! Slash Gratton or some of his men'll see it! They'll come—"

Buck Barton and Jean moved swiftly

across the room now, until they stood above the man cowering on the bunk. Jean's hand went out and rested on his arm—squeezed it comfortingly.

Then Buck Barton spoke. "How did you get here, feller? How did you break away from Gratton? Where are they?"

"Sisson took me back to the hideout," Bob Ralston said unsteadily. "Slash Gratton locked me in the saddle-house. Left Slemp an' Carver to guard me while him an' his outfit went to scout the place where they're plannin' to hold up the stage that's bringin' in the guards for the bullion."

Buck Barton nodded in the darkness. "Sisson told me what he had done. Laughed about trickin' me—an' you."

"I'll get Sisson some day!" The youngster's voice took on a note that surprised both Buck and Jean by its cold hardness. "I'll get him, if it's the last thing I do!"

"Yeah. But about you—how did you—"

"After Gratton left, Slemp an' Carver come down to the saddle house." The boy's voice was thin and high again. "They took turns slammin' me around with their fists—beatin' me with a latigo. Finally I couldn't stand it no more. I grabbed Carver's gun out of its holster and drilled him. God—I drilled him—through the head! He—he fell down—an'—an' died!" Bob Ralston's voice had died to a frightened whisper.

"An' a good job it was!" Buck Barton said heartily. "Been needin' a bullet for a long time. But what did Slemp do?"

The youngster seemed to get a grip on his nerves. "Slemp run—turned an' run. Then I snaked a horse out of the shed an' hightailed it. Wasn't gone far before I knew Slemp was on my trail. Only place I knowed to hide out was here. Outrun Slemp, but I been lookin' for him to find me."

Buck Barton straightened his shoulders—drew a long breath. It came to him that there was more than a hint of nerve in the frail body of Bob Ralston—that he was not the pasty-faced craven that he had taken him for before.

"You're safe enough—for a while, Bob," he said softly. "Jean an' me just rode up from Cobalt, an' we didn't see nor hear a soul on the way."

Only then did it seem to dawn on the youngster. A sharp breath hissed from his lips. "But you—Tomichi Kid—Sisson said he gunned you down—that you was like to make a die of it in the Cobalt jail!"

Buck Barton chuckled softly. "You can forget the Tomichi Kid part of it, Bob. Sisson did gun me down—an' I did nigh make a die of it. But yore sister snaked me out, jus' a jump ahead of a lynch-mob. An' here we are."

"But Jean—I thought you'd headed north for—"

"You didn't think I'd leave you, Bob? As long as Slash Gratton—"

But now Buck Barton broke in quickly. "Plenty of blankets here in the cabin to cover the windows. We'll blanket 'em, an' have a light an' a fire. I'm honin' for a cup of hot coffee—an' a little talk."

CHAPTER XVIII

BOB RALSTON RIDES

WITH the windows of the little cabin closely covered, Buck Barton lighted the smoky oil lamp. He set it on the table and turned to light a fire in the stone fireplace. But Jean Ralston grasped him firmly by the arm and marched him to the bunk.

"You need rest, Buck. The trip wasn't easy on you. You look almost done in. Bob and I will see to the coffee and bacon."

Buck Barton opened his mouth to protest, but he realized that she was right. The tenseness of the last few hours was past, and the reaction was draining the false strength that had kept him in the saddle. His legs trembled beneath him, his head swirled dizzily, and the wound in his chest was beginning to pain terribly.

He lay down on the bunk and closed his eyes. For a moment Jean Ralston stood above him, a strange and tender light in her eyes. He looked so weak and helpless—and yet so strong. Bob Ralston spoke softly behind her, but for a while she could not trust her voice. At last she pulled her gaze from Buck Barton.

"You build the fire, Bob—and I'll get the coffee ready." Then in answer to an unspoken question in the youngster's eyes, she nodded.

"He knows—about you and me, Bob He was willing to help us, even when he thought you were an outlaw, and I was an—an outlaw's woman. But now—"

The words were hardly more than a whisper that did not carry to Buck Barton's ears.

Bob's answer came just as soft. "I—know, Jean—but what did he mean—by forgettin' that—Tomichi Kid—"

"He isn't the Tomichi Kid. He's one of Tom Durham's deputies—Buck Barton. He came down here to clean out Slash Gratton and his outfit."

Bob Ralston's eyes widened. "Then he—then you—"

Jean Ralston read the question in the youngster's eager face, in his bright eyes. She colored just a little, and shot a glance at Buck Barton. The wounded man was already sleeping heavily. A tremulous smile crossed her parted lips. She nodded softly. Then she drew a long breath, and spoke in natural tone.

"Get the fire going, Bob."

For a full fifteen minutes the slim youngster and his sister moved around the little cabin. The coffee was boiling, sending its aromatic breath into every corner of the tight little room. It seemed to reach Buck Barton's senses, even in his deep sleep. He moved a little, sniffed the air—then opened his eyes slowly.

For a little while the room swam in his vision. Then it cleared. He could see Jean, the firelight tinting her face, glinting her hair. For a moment he just looked, almost awed by the beauty of the slender girl. Then he pulled his eyes from her and sought out Bob. The youngster was pulling two crude chairs up to the slab table. Then Jean turned to the shelf in the far corner where the scant store of dishes rested.

"Get three cups, Jean," Buck said softly, a little chuckle deep in his voice. "Nothin' can keep me away from coffee that smells as good as that."

Jean Ralston whirled swiftly, her eyes wide. Then her smile answered his. "You get the cups, Bob," she said.

Then she sped to Buck's side and helped him to his feet. He was relieved to find that while his legs were still shaky, the few minutes sleep had done wonders for him. Jean steadied him as he made for the table—eased him down into the chair.

Coffee, a box of stale biscuits and bacon that was a little rancid—not much in the way of fine groceries, but the three made the best of it. Bob ate hungrily, his first taste of real food since he had been locked in the saddle house at Gratton's headquarters. Jean and Buck would hardly have noticed the difference if what they ate had been sawdust.

WHEN they finished, Jean rose and took the dishes from the table. Bob made as if he would push his chair back. But Buck Barton's words stopped him.

"I'm honin' to know about Gratton's plans, Bob. Did you, mebbe, hear the outfit talkin'? Do you know about the bullion, an' how Slash Gratton is figurin' on gettin' it?"

Bob Ralston nodded eagerly. "They didn't try to hide their talk on account of me. Sisson tol' Gratton he had gunned you. Gratton 'lowed that didn't make no difference—that mebbe it even helped. Figured Sheriff Wright would have his mind on somethin' else."

For just a moment Buck was silent, his eyes narrowed to the thinnest crack. Then he leaned closer. "Reckon my gettin' away, an' Jean runnin' out, won't make no difference, either. I know jus' how Slash Gratton'll figure. He still thinks I'm the Tomichi Kid—I'm plumb certain of that. Sisson won't tell him no different, an' Sisson is the only one who knows."

"But what makes you think Sisson will keep his trap shut?" Bob asked.

"He's got ideas that he's smarter than Gratton—an' I halfway believe he is. He knows that his own skin ain't safe as long as I'm alive an' kickin'—but he'll figure he can wipe me out alone. Won't take nobody into his confidence—excep' mebbe Link Freeman. Yeah—I think he'll tell Freeman. Them two will work together to—" He paused for a moment, his eyes seeming to stare straight through Bob Ralston. Then he spoke again.

"I'm afraid you'll have to ride the paint hoss down to Cobalt, boy."

Bob Ralston straightened, his eyes wide. The color drained from his face. "But I can't, Buck! Sisson—an' Link Freeman—an' Sheriff Wright—"

"You'll have to do it. Ain't no other way. I've got to get word to Sisson—an' to Sheriff Wright."

Bob Ralston's hands trembled and his mouth went slack. Jean was back now, and standing behind her brother. Her wide eyes were upon Buck Barton's face—questioning but not frightened eyes.

"Yeah," Buck Barton was talking slowly now, almost as if he were speaking his thoughts aloud, "you'll ride down to Cobalt—in the darkness—stop at Aunt Molly Carter's—tell her what you're up against—

an' listen to her. That's it, boy—listen to Aunt Molly Carter."

"But I don't dare, Buck! Sisson would—"

"Wait until Buck finishes, Bob," Jean said softly, her hand dropping to his shoulder. "He's not asking you to do anything he wouldn't, if it was not for his wound."

Bob Ralston's lips trembled and his face was white. But he nodded his head. "All right, Buck. What shall I tell Aunt Molly?"

Buck Barton talked swiftly—words short and terse. Then he repeated his instructions twice over until he was sure that Bob knew every detail. Now he rose from his chair, and stretched out his hand to the youngster.

"I'm trustin' you, boy—for I know what kind of blood you got in you. Trustin' you to do what I've said, spite of hell or high water. Even when you've got to ride without a six-gun rubbin' yore leg."

The slim boy steadied now. The color came back to his cheeks. His narrow shoulders squared and his chin was high. He nodded. "I'll do it—come hell or high water!"

From the dark porch of the little cabin, Jean Ralston and Buck Barton watched Bob Ralston swing into the saddle—held the white splotches of the paint horse in their vision until they finally faded in the gloom. Buck was conscious of the slim form holding close to him—knew the varied emotions that were sweeping through her.

His hand found her. His voice was low and even. "He's a good kid, Jean—a brave kid. You'd ought to be proud of him."

"Thanks, Buck." Jean Ralston's voice shook. "He's—he's all I've got, and if anything should happen to him—"

"He'll come through safe an' sound, Jean. Nobody'll be lookin' for him in Cobalt. Nobody but Sisson knows him there, an' Sisson will be out huntin' us—or on his way to Gratton's hideout."

"I—I hope so, Buck. I'll not worry any more. Luck has been with us, so far."

"Yeah—an' if the breaks are right, we'll come out on top."

He turned and entered the cabin again. After a few moments, Jean took her eyes from the darkness where Bob had disappeared, and followed Buck. With the door closed once more, Buck relighted the lamp. Then he faced Jean.

"The bunk is yores, Jean. I'll spread a bed roll in the lean-to. You can sleep peaceful. I'll keep my ears open for anyone prowlin' around, but I don't figure—"

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" Jean said emphatically. "You need rest and sleep. You've got to get steady on your feet—strong enough to ride, when the time comes for a showdown. You'll take the bunk—and no argument."

And for once Buck Barton was willing for the slender girl to have her way.

CHAPTER XIX

SISSON REPORTS

EVEN before Buck Barton and Jean Ralston started for the little cabin in the high country, Sisson was on his way to Slash Gratton's place. It was not good news he was carrying—and he was a little edgy. Gratton wouldn't like it in the least. But the renegade deputy sheriff was confident of his own ability to talk himself out of any censure.

The plan for lynching Buck Barton had backfired. He had caught sight of a paint horse, and was sure that Molly Carter and her whelp had something to do with Buck's escape. But when he found only Jean Ralston at the Carter place, he was jarred out of his certainty.

Jean had looked ill—and Sisson did not doubt for a moment that she really was. He smiled grimly to himself as he left the Carter home. Even if he did have to tell Slash Gratton that Buck Barton had escaped, he could bring news that would take Gratton's mind from the Tomichi Kid.

He was not greatly worried about Buck Barton. The man could not ride far with that great hole through his chest. He'd have to hide out somewhere close—and Sisson was sure that Buck did not know anyone in the hills well enough to ask for sanctuary. He could find the wounded man at his leisure. Right now there was something bigger on tap.

He stopped at the jail only long enough to tell Sheriff Wright that he was on the Tomichi Kid's trail—that he might be gone for a day or two. His hand caressed the butt of his six-gun as he spoke. The opportunity for drilling the old officer had not come while the mob was working—and now there were several of the townspeople with the sheriff. Sisson withdrew his hand reluctantly.

Once out of Cobalt, Sisson prodded his horse to a swift pace, heading straight for

Slash Gratton's hideout. There were still two or three hours of darkness when he pulled up at the edge of the little clearing. But lights flickered in the windows of the squat log and stone house. Sisson's eyes narrowed. He leaned across his saddle horn. Something was going on here—something had happened— He stiffened, for a half-dozen riders slammed into the clearing from the other side, and drew to a halt at the hitchrail.

He saw the door swing open—caught Slash Gratton's huge form in the opening. He couldn't catch the words, but he knew from the way the big outlaw swung his arms that he was angry. For just a moment a look of fear crossed Sisson's face. Then his jaws set firmly and his shoulders straightened.

He gathered up his reins and touched his horse with sharp rowels. The animal raced across the little stretch of clearing and pulled up beside the string at the hitchrail. Sisson swung down and followed the other men into the brightly lighted room.

He stood behind the others, and apparently Slash Gratton did not see him for a moment. The big man's face was twisted in seething wrath, and his huge hands were clenched into tight fists.

"Damned outfit of blind mice—that's what you are! Six of you—all supposed to be range-broke and timber-wise! But you let a white-faced kid outsmart you! Let him get clean away!"

"But, boss, we've looked—" Slemp began.

Slash Gratton turned on the turkey-necked man. "You, Slemp—you stood by and watched him gun down Carver—watched him snake a horse out of the shed and get plumb away! Damn your yellow hide, I'd ought to—"

Then the outlaw leader saw Sisson's astonished face at the back of the crowd. His words broke off short and his eyes narrowed. He took a step forward, and his startled men, who had not yet seen the squat man, backed away.

"When did you get here, Sisson? I told you to stay in Cobalt to watch out for—"

Sisson elbowed his way through the crowd and faced the big man. He forced the twisted grin to his face. "Seems like you been havin' some excitement out here, too."

"Never mind that! What are you doing here?"

Sisson shook his head sadly. "Got some bad news, Gratton. The Tomichi Kid done broke jail."

"What!" Gratton took another step toward Sisson—glared squarely into the squat man's eyes. His hand hovered over the butt of his six-gun. "You mean you stood by and let him—"

SISSON faced the big outlaw, shoulders squared. "Sorry, Gratton. But I figured he was too bad shot up to make a try for it. Reckon he'd have stayed put, at that—if it wasn't for the lynch-mob."

"What lynch-mob? Who—"

Swiftly Sisson related what had happened in Cobalt that night, carefully covering his and Link Freeman's part in it. Even at that, Gratton eyed him suspiciously as he talked. Nor for the moment did Sisson tell of his visit to Molly Carter's house. But when he finished, he turned and looked at the rest of the outfit—then back to Gratton.

"Little somethin' else I'd like to tell you —personal an' private."

Slash Gratton glowered at the squat man for a moment. Then nodded. "Rest of you hombres get out an' take another look for Bob Ralston. I want that pasty-faced kid back here by mornin'."

There was a queer glint in the back of Sisson's eyes, as he watched the hard-bitten ruffians file out of the house. But he said nothing until Slash Gratton put the question to him bluntly.

"You were saying, Sisson—"

"The Tomichi Kid has gone—but I know where Jean Ralston is hidin'."

Slash Gratton started—then a slow smile spread across his face. "You've seen her —she hasn't headed north—hasn't run out on me?"

Sisson shook his head. "She's safe enough—sick in bed in Cobalt. She ain't goin' to run out on nobody—for a long time."

"That's good, Sisson. I was getting some worried. When Bob Ralston gunned Carver down, and headed into the timber, I was afraid maybe she had gone back to the Anchor spread, and that he'd follow her. But now—"

Sisson's grin widened. "He's hidin' out in the timber somewhere, most like. Too scared to run—an' afraid to come back."

Gratton shook his head. "Always was yellow—but something must have happened to him. He grabbed Carver's gun and shot

him between the eyes. Had the drop on Slemp, and made him back down."

"I know Slemp an' Carver," Sisson grunted. "Likely they prodded him so much he went crazy for a spell. A man'll do anything if'n he's drove far enough. I'd bet my last pair o' boots that young Ralston'd like to be back here right this minute."

Gratton seemed to be greatly relieved by Sisson's confidence. The scowl faded slowly from his forehead. He turned and slumped heavily into his chair. He gestured with his hand toward a shelf in the corner.

"Bottle of good liquor there, Sisson. Get it—and we'll both have a shot."

When they had guzzled the fiery whisky, Sisson leaned across the table. "About the bullion, Gratton. You're not goin' to—"

"We're playing that deal just as we planned," Gratton said. "We'll stick up the stage bringing in the guards. Bring them here and lock them in the saddle house. Leave a couple of men to watch them. The rest of us will take the stage into Cobalt—load the bullion—and take the trail toward the railroad. Circle, and come back here."

"What about the guards, after you get back?"

Slash Gratton grinned crookedly. "Time enough to think of that later. Might be a good idea to load them in the stage and run it over the rim of Skull Canyon."

Sisson answered Gratton's grin. "You've got a smart head onto yore shoulders, Slash. That way, nobody could ever pin nothin' onto us. Make it look like the guards had figured on stealin' the bullion, an' had not slipped up on."

"I'd thought of that," Gratton said evenly.

For a moment Sisson was silent. Then he looked up at Slash Gratton. "About the gal—an' the Tomichi Kid? We'll let 'em go, until after this deal?"

Slash Gratton shook his head. "This is Wednesday. Stage will be coming down the trail Saturday morning. Nothing to keep you from looking for the Tomichi Kid in the meantime. In fact, it'd be just as well if Sheriff Wright thought you were out on his trail when the stage rolls in."

Sisson nodded. "Sort o' make an alibi for me—when McDonald an' ol' Sam Worth find out the gold never got to the railroad, huh?"

"Yeah. You're worth a lot to us—as deputy sheriff, but not—" Slash Gratton's eyes narrowed, and his lips twisted with meaning that Sisson could not mistake.

A burst of anger welled up in Sisson's heart, but he masked it with a grin. "Worth a lot as deputy—an' would be worth a heap more as sheriff, Gratton. Some of these days Wright is goin' to stop a slug, an' then—"

"That can wait until after we have the bullion safe. Right now, you'd better head back for Cobalt."

Sisson rose and turned toward the door. Then he stopped and spun on his heel. His hand went to his pocket—pulled out a package. He tossed it to Slash Gratton.

"Here's another shield to hang alongside them two you've got in yore office. Next time I ride out, I'll bring Buck Barton's six-gun an' belt. Figured you'd like to have 'em, Gratton."

Before Slash Gratton could speak, the squat man was out onto the narrow porch. While Gratton's eyes were upon the package in his hand, Sisson swung into his saddle and headed into the Cobalt trail. Slash Gratton caught the thud of hoofs, and listened until they faded.

"Sisson is getting a little too big for his chaps," he grunted. "When I've got the bullion in my strong box, I'll—"

He turned and opened the door into his little office room. For a moment he stared at the two badges on the opposite wall—at the pair of gun-belts with filled holsters that hung beneath them. Then he stepped across and fastened the third shield alongside the others.

"Lassiter, Simms and Barton," he muttered. "Too bad Barton is planted down by the line. Simms and Lassiter would like his company."

CHAPTER XX

AUNT MOLLY TALKS

COBALT was dark when Bob Ralston pulled the paint horse to a stop at the little shed behind Molly Carter's house. He slid from the saddle and silently led the animal into its stall. When he had stripped the saddle and bridle from the animal, he stood in the doorway.

Through all the long and dangerous trip

down from the cabin, he had been steeling himself—telling himself that nobody would see him enter town, that no one would ever know that he was hiding out in Aunt Molly's little house. He had almost made himself believe it. But now those misgivings came back to him.

It wouldn't have taken much to make him saddle up and streak out of town again. Until he pictured the serenely confident look on Jean's face—remembered Buck's slap on the back and his hearty voice. Bob Ralston straightened his narrow shoulders and lifted his chin. He stepped from the horse shed and made straight for the little house.

Molly Carter's house was dark and silent. Bob circled it twice before he stepped softly onto the front porch. He listened intently for any sound for a moment. None came. Now he knocked softly. No answer. Again his knuckles rapped, sharply this time. After a dozen breaths, he caught the muffled sound of slippered feet inside.

Now a voice, low and sleep-muffled. "Who is it? What d'you want at this time of night?"

"Aunt Molly!" Bob's voice was low but urgent. "It's me—Bob Ralston!"

The door swung open quickly. The little old woman stood in the opening, a wrap drawn tightly about her. Her head was thrust forward, eyes upon the slim youngster on the porch. For a moment neither spoke. Then Molly Carter backed into the room.

"Come in—quick—Bob!"

The boy scurried into the room, and the woman shut the door swiftly. She drew him back, her urgent hand on his arm. "What are you doing in Cobalt, Bob Ralston? Don't you know that the town is full of danger for anyone bearing your name? Don't you know—"

"Jean and Buck Barton sent me, Aunt Molly!" The boy's voice was breathless. "I've got a message for you—a mighty important message!"

"Where's your horse? You didn't leave him at the hitchrail?"

"In the horse shed, Aunt Molly. Nobody'll—"

But already Molly Carter was leading him toward the little room where Buck Barton and Jean Ralston had hidden earlier this same night. She shut the door carefully, and blanketed the window. Then she lighted the smoky oil lamp. She gestured Bob Ralston to a seat on the edge of the bed, dropping into a chair herself.

"The message, Bob—what is it?"

"There's twenty thousand in gold bullion in the bank vault. Stage comin' in Saturday with guards to take it on to the railroad. Slash Gratton an' his outfit aimin' to stick up the stage before it gets here, and take the guards off. Goin' to bring the stage in themselves, an' get away with the bullion."

Molly Carter's eyes opened wide. "We've got to tell Sheriff Wright, boy! No time to waste!" She half rose from her chair.

"Buck Barton says nobody is to know it, Aunt Molly!"

"What?" The little old woman's startled exclamation brought a twisted, mirthless smile to Bob Ralston's face.

"Buck Barton says that Sisson is hooked up with Slash Gratton—an' I—I know it, too."

"Yes. You know it, boy—if it's true."

"What makes you say—"

"I know all about it. Jean told me. But go ahead."

Bob Ralston began slowly. "Buck says that if Sheriff Wright gets any idea of what's to happen, he'll tell Sisson. Nobody can make Wright believe Sisson is a crook."

"Don't I know that!" Molly Carter said bitterly.

"But Buck's got a plan," Bob continued. "He 'lows you're the only one that can help him with it."

A soft smile flicked the little woman's face for a moment. Then she looked sternly at Bob again. "What does he think I can do? Can't handle a six-gun—can't outtalk Sisson!"

"Listen! Here's the way he's got it figured out! It means you'll have to talk to Wright—an' to Sisson."

"I can talk to 'em—but it won't do any good."

Again that hint of a smile on Bob Ralston's lips. "Anyhow, here's the lay!"

He talked swiftly for a full ten minutes. At first the little old woman listened without interest. But as he came to the plan Buck Barton had worked out, interest grew in her eyes. She leaned toward the slim boy, her eyes wide and her lips parted. When Bob Ralston finished, she nodded eagerly.

"That young Barton is plenty smart, Bob. And a real man to tie to. I hope Jean—But that's something else again. I'll do

exactly as he says—and I'll not waste a minute. You head back for the cabin, before daylight catches you. I'll see Wright—wake him up. Time he was woke up, anyhow."

SHE watched the slim youngster head toward the horse shed. Listened until the soft plop of hoofs told her he was on his way back to the cabin in the high country. Then she returned to the house and dressed swiftly. In the pitch darkness of the hour before sunrise, she made straight for the stone jail. She knew Sheriff Wright slept in the little office—and she was certain he would be alone. She shrewdly guessed that Sisson had ridden to Slash Gratton's hideout to break the news to the outlaw leader.

Cobalt slept heavily. Not a light showed—not a sound or movement met her alert eyes and ears as she sped to the jail. She stopped at the door for a moment, her ear to the slabs. She could hear the rumbling snores of the old sheriff on his cot next to the south wall.

A faint amused smile crossed her face. Sheriff Wright didn't lock his door. It did not occur to the old man that anyone would want to jump him. He'd be plenty surprised in a few moments. She lifted the latch softly and stepped inside. The air was stuffy with stale tobacco smoke.

She made her way to the low bunk—dropped her hand lightly on Sheriff Wright's low shoulder. In spite of his snores, Sheriff Wright slept lightly. The touch awakened him instantly. He jerked to a sitting position on the bunk, his hand streaking for his six-gun butt at his side.

"You wouldn't shoot me, Sheriff."

"Who—why, it's Molly Carter!" The sheriff's voice was thick with sleep. "What are you doin' here at this—"

"Come to talk to you, Wright—just once more!"

"If it's about Sisson, I ain't interested!" Wright grunted.

"Tired of hearing me talk about him, huh?"

"Plenty tired!"

"Then here's your chance to get shut of me, once and for all. Just listen for five minutes. Then if you're willing to take a chance on what I aim to tell you, I'll never mention Sisson again."

For an instant Wright was silent. "Sounds like a deal," he grunted at last. "Start talkin'!"

"All right. I'll begin first off by telling you that I know where the Tomichi Kid is hiding out."

"You know where—Sisson said he was plumb shore you was mixed up in his breakin' jail. Where is he?"

"You still want him, Wright?"

"Course I do! Blast it, he's a murderer an' a hossthief! Due to stretch rope!"

"Seems like somebody tried to hang him—and didn't make a go of it," the little old woman said softly.

"Lynch mob," Sheriff Wright growled. "I'd like to get my hands onto the hombre who stirred 'em up."

"I know who it was. May tell you, after this deal is worked out. But about the Tomichi Kid. I'll tell you where he is—provided you promise to follow my directions exactly."

"You know I could throw you in jail for holding out information like that," the sheriff snorted.

"You'd look real cute doing that," Molly Carter said evenly. "Do you make the deal—or don't you?"

"All right. It's a deal!"

"You're to ride out of town Friday afternoon. Tell Sisson—and anyone else who asks you where you're headed—that you've got business down near Alaviso way. That you won't be back for three-four days."

"Then he's down that way, huh?"

"No. But before I give you the directions, you promise to ride up on him without dragging your guns—that you listen to him, and do what he tells you to do."

"But he's a crook! I've got to bring him in!"

"Follow his directions, and you can bring him in—if you want to."

"Blast you, Molly Carter! You've got me by the short hair! I promise!"

Swiftly Molly Carter gave the sheriff the directions to the little cabin in the hills. Then she turned toward the door. But once again she faced the old officer. "You'd better take a couple of men along. And I'd suggest Slim Bisbee of the Turkey Track and Burke Talbot of the Box O. Might be a good idea to take a half dozen extra gun-belts and filled holsters too, Sheriff."

Before Wright could sputter another question, Molly Carter was out of the little office, and speeding back toward her own home. Half of her task was finished—the

easiest half. The rest would have to wait until late Friday night—two long days.

She reached her front gate just as the sun was pinking the eastern sky. For a moment her wise old eyes swept the little town. It was the only home she had known for thirty years—and not such a bad place, after all. Many memories—both happy and bitter, came to her. But the plainest of all was of Jack Carter, her husband who had been shot down by a long-rider outfit.

Her lips were a thin straight line. "I've promised you that the time is coming, Sisson—and I've a feeling that it's close!"

SHE entered the little house with a feeling of excitement—of something important impending. Nor did that feeling leave her the next two days. Cobalt was quiet—almost too quiet, she thought. Sam Worth, the banker, made the trip from his trim house to the stone bank twice a day—just as slow and plodding as always.

Once or twice she caught sight of McDonald, owner of the Lucky Dagger mine. And Sisson, too. The regenade deputy returned soon after sunup, and seemed to have nothing to do—nothing on his mind. Molly Carter made it a point to be down at the New York Emporium for a bag of sugar and a pound of prunes right at the time Sheriff Wright was ready to ride out of Cobalt late Friday afternoon.

She stood on the wooden sidewalk in front of the store watching as the old officer stamped out of his office. When he had mounted, he swung his horse around in the street, passing very close to her.

"I'm leavin' now—takin' yore word for it, Molly Carter! Pickin' up Slim Bisbee an' Burke Talbot out beyond the ridge. God help you if you've steered me wrong."

Her crooked smile was his only answer. She turned into the store now. When her purchases were made and she was back on the sidewalk, Sheriff Wright had disappeared. She looked across at the little office. She drew a long breath, for Sisson sat at Wright's desk.

"Just as well see him now as any time," she muttered.

Resolutely she stepped from the sidewalk and crossed the rutted, dusty street. She stood outside the window, apparently undecided upon the next move. Sisson glanced up from the paper on the desk, saw her and grinned widely but without mirth.

She opened the door and stepped inside hesitantly. Sisson straightened in his chair. That twisted grin was still on his lips.

"What can I do for you, Mrs. Carter? The sheriff is out of town on business. I'm his head deputy."

"No need to put on the dog for me, Sisson." Molly Carter's voice was sharp, steel-threaded. "Just because I'm here is no proof that I like you any better than I did. You're a crook and a murderer—even if you are a deputy."

"Them things have to be proved." Sisson spoke softly, holding down the anger she knew was so close to the surface. "If that's all you come to tell me about—"

"Wasn't that. I'm a taxpayer here in Cobalt. Got a right to protection. Somebody stole Jimmie's paint horse—and I want that animal back."

The grin wiped itself suddenly from Sisson's lips. "That—paint hoss—huh? When?"

"Couple or three nights ago. Same night you busted into my house."

Sisson nodded slowly. "I knowed I saw that paint hoss in the dark—knowed it was carryin' the Tomichi Kid. But you swore—"

"Swore to nothing but the truth, Sisson. But that horse is gone—and I want it back."

"Tell me where the Tomichi Kid is holed up—an' I'll tell you where to find yore paint hoss. You'll never see one until you see the other. Damn his hide, I'd like to—"

"Maybe I can tell you where he is—or where he will be tomorrow morning at sunup," Molly Carter said softly. "Maybe—I'd do it—if you promised I'd get that paint horse back again."

Sisson jerked erect as if he had been clubbed. His piggish eyes opened into a stare and his slack lips dropped open. "You mean—you know—where—"

Molly Carter nodded. "I know where he will be."

"How do you know?"

"About that paint—" she began.

"I'll get that hoss for you!" he snapped. "That one, an' another to boot, if I can lay eyes onto the Tomichi Kid."

Molly Carter backed toward the door. She shook her head slowly. "I—don't—know, Sisson. I'm scared to tell you. If you didn't get him—if he knew—"

"I'll get him, damn it! Tell me!"

She was standing in the doorway now. "I'll make up my mind. Come up to my

house at ten o'clock. I'll be decided by then."

Sisson rose swiftly, but already she was speeding up the sidewalk. He watched her from the door, curses bubbling from his lips. Then he went back inside, and slumped into the big chair. Nor did he move until well after dark.

CHAPTER XXI

TRAPPED

SISSON drew up at Aunt Molly Carter's front gate at exactly ten o'clock that night. The oil lamp cast a ruddy light through the front window, and he could see the little old woman sitting serenely in her rocking chair in the front room. The renegade deputy swung from his saddle and strode up the narrow walk to the porch. Molly Carter looked up as she heard his step on the slabs. A mirthless smile flicked her lips.

"I've got a feeling the time is close, Sisson!" she murmured.

A sharp knock—then the door opened and Sisson stepped inside. He blinked for a moment in the bright light. Molly Carter gestured him to a big chair that had been Jack Carter's.

"All right. What's the lay?" Sisson asked abruptly.

"I—don't—" Molly Carter began hesitantly.

"Spill it, or I'll—"

"You promise you'll not tell where you found out? You won't let him know—"

"I'm tellin' nobody."

Molly Carter nodded. "Jean Ralston left the same night you were here."

Sisson stiffened, and his eyes blinked uncertainly. "But you said she was—"

"She was sick—but she left anyhow. I didn't figure what she intended to do for quite a spell. Then it came to me. She said she'd promised to meet someone at sunup Saturday morning. Mentioned a cabin in the high country. Seemed right anxious to get to going. Just this morning it struck me all of a sudden. She was aiming to meet the Tomichi Kid—at that cabin up beyond Skull Canyon."

"You know—about that cabin?"

"Why of course. It was one of Jack's line cabins, until you—until he was killed."

Sisson jerked to his feet. A twisted, mirthless grin split his face. "That's all I want to know. I'll be there—at the meeting."

Molly Carter spoke breathlessly. "But your promise—you'll not—"

"Never mind. He'll not be interested in anything for quite a spell."

The squat deputy strode to the door, across the porch and down the sidewalk. Molly Carter watched him swing into his saddle. Then she turned back into the little house. She was tired now. The excitement and suspense had kept her going for two days—but it was all over. The rest depended upon Buck Barton and Sheriff Wright.

Those two same men were meeting at almost the exact time Sisson was talking to Molly Carter. Wright, Bisbee and Talbot had ridden into the clearing around the little cabin straight-backed and heads high. Their hands were well away from their holsters.

At first Sheriff Wright was almost persuaded that Molly Carter had directed him wrongly. The cabin seemed deserted. There was no smoke from the chimney to make a gray plume against the black sky—no light from the window and no sound.

"I don't like it—none!" Slim Bisbee grunted. "The Tomichi Kid is a bad one. You cain't trust him—"

"Ain't trustin' him!" Sheriff Wright growled. "I'm trustin' Molly Carter. I'd take her word for—"

The door of the cabin swung open, and a dim light from behind brought a slender, erect form into plain sight. A skirted form, with a halo of light-glinted hair. Burke Talbot drew a long, admiring breath. A short exclamation came from Slim Bisbee's lips. Sheriff Wright pulled his horse to a stop, its nose over the edge of the porch.

"You're—Sheriff Wright?" The voice was musical, in spite of the hint of fear that threaded it.

"Right. An' you?"

"Jean Ralston. Daughter of Boyd Ralston who used to own the Anchor—before he got—got killed."

"Heerd of him. What you doin' here?" Wright grunted.

"You came to find—to talk to—the Tomichi Kid?"

"Promised Aunt Molly Carter I'd talk to him—listen to his story—before I take him back to jail."

"And the other two with you—"

"Slim Bisbee an' Burke Talbot. Deputized 'em both. They'll stay put. Where's the Tomichi Kid?"

"Light. Ground anchor your horses and come into the cabin."

THE three men swung stiffly from their saddles and let their reins trail. Sheriff Wright entered first, as the girl held the door wide. The two punchers followed at his heels. All three still kept their hands well away from their holsters.

Inside, Sheriff Wright's swiftly roving eyes noted the blankets over the windows—the cold fireplace. A twisted smile flicked his lips for a split second. Then he made out a form in the dim light, over there on the bunk. He shot a glance at the girl—nodded his head in the direction of that form.

"The Tomichi Kid? Still in pretty bad shape, huh?"

"It's me—Buck Barton, Sheriff." The voice was low and even. "Feeling right strong now. Two-three days have helped a lot. Been waitin' for you to show up."

"Still talkin' that Buck Barton stuff. I tell you, Sisson—"

"Set down, Sheriff!" Buck's voice was stronger now—harder. "I've got some talkin' to do. After that, if you figure I'm lyin'—"

"You go back to the jailhouse—an' the gallows!" Wright finished.

But now the three newcomers dragged crude chairs toward the bunk—sat down, leaning toward the hunched figure of Buck Barton eagerly. So far, Buck was still wrapped in blankets, and Sheriff Wright had an uneasy feeling that a six-gun was trained upon him beneath that covering.

"All right! Talk fast—an' make it good!" the sheriff grated.

In swift, terse words Buck Barton related all that had happened in the last week—from the time he had snaked Jean Ralston from her saddle, up on the rim of Skull Canyon. The three men listened without interruption.

When he had finished, Sheriff Wright shook his head. "Sounds possible—but not reasonable. Sisson says he's seen the Tomichi Kid plenty times—an' you're him. Now you're tryin' to tell me that Sisson is crooked. Hooked up with Gratton's long-rider outfit. That'll take some provin'!"

"Why do you reckon I wanted you to come here, Wright?"

The old officer blinked. "Why—why—"

"The proof is comin' up, Sheriff. You promised Aunt Molly Carter that you'd do what I ask you—before you take me in to jail."

Wright nodded. "I promised, drat her. An' I'll go through with it. But it better not take too long."

Buck Barton looked at Bisbee and Talbot. "These two hombres you brought with you—they're square shooters?"

"They're the ones Molly Carter tol' me to bring," Wright grunted. "Nobody ever spoke a word against 'em."

Slim Bisbee stepped forward, his face a scowling mask. "We ain't never swung a long loop, nor gunned down anybody except in a square fight. We don't trail with crooks—don't aim to. But if you're talkin' straight, we'd admire plenty to be in on this deal." Then the scowl faded, and a half-shamed look crept over his face. "I'd—I'd just as well tell you, afore Aunt Molly Carter does. Burke Talbot an' me sort of stirred up that lynch mob that come for you. If it turns out we was wrong, we've got plenty to even up."

Buck Barton nodded. "That's the reason Aunt Molly wanted Sheriff Wright to bring you, I reckon." A smile flicked his lips. "Sort o' puts it up to me. If I'm wrong, you can finish the job."

Now he turned to Sheriff Wright. "Sisson'll be up here at sunup. Now here's what I want you three to do!" He talked swiftly for ten minutes, while Sheriff Wright and the two punchers listened with intent eagerness. When he had finished, Wright spoke for the three.

"We're givin' you the chance, feller. But we're watchin' you, too."

CHAPTER XXII

THE TRAP SPRINGS

THE hours until the first streak of false dawn pinked the eastern sky were long ones—draggy ones, there in the little cabin. Long ones, too, for the renegade deputy, prodding his horse up the treacherous slopes in the darkness. A dozen times he scratched a match to look at his thick gold watch. Sunup came at five o'clock, and he wanted to be there right on time. Wanted to jump Buck Barton and Jean Ralston at the moment of their meeting.

A fixed grin of cruel amusement twisted his face. That pair had tricked him, but this time he'd make up for all of it. A low chuckle came from his lips. He'd enjoy every minute of their squirming—enjoy their fear—the moment between the time Buck Barton knew he was to die, and the instant the bullet plowed through his heart.

He looked forward, too, to the amazement Slash Gratton would show, when he returned to the hideout and found Jean Ralston there ahead of him. Gratton would be glad to know that Buck Barton was dead. Might even give him an extra split of the twenty thousand in bullion on account of it.

He pulled his horse to a halt for a moment on the rim of Skull Canyon. While the animal breathed heavily, Sisson looked down into the dark depths of the slash. He could picture what was due to happen there between sunup and noon. He could almost see Slash Gratton and his outfit stop the stage down there.

He computed swiftly in his mind. If the stage came through early, Gratton should be at the hideout with the prisoner guards at a little after noon. Wouldn't stay there long. Should be on the way down to Cobalt by two o'clock with his own men in the place of the guards.

"I'll head for Gratton's place by three," he told himself. "Jean Ralston'll be riding in front of me, hands thonged behind her back." His grin widened. "Reckon she'll be bawlin' like a calf."

He gathered up his reins again, and dug his rowels cruelly into his horse's ribs. The animal plunged on up the trail. Now Sisson's eyes were upon the eastern sky above the peaks. A faint tinge of pink began to streak the thin clouds.

"Comin' sunup," he grunted. "Timed it just right."

He drew up at the edge of the clearing that surrounded the little cabin. Even as he looked, a ruddy square of light told him that someone had just lighted a lamp in the cabin. In another two or three minutes a thin column of gray smoke laced the shadows.

"He's up—an' waitin' for her," Sisson muttered. "Wonder which way she'll be—"

He stopped short, backed his horse a little deeper into the brush. For a slim figure, muffled to the chin, came out of the tangle at the north edge of the clearing, to his left.

"She's comin'!" Sisson breathed.

The muffled form swayed unsteadily, as if with dragging fatigue. In the growing light Sisson could make out the white face above the close-drawn wrap. But the distance was too great to be absolutely sure that it was Jean Ralston. Still, there was no reason to doubt.

Now the figure was half way across the clearing, making straight for the cabin. Sisson leaned forward in his saddle, his eyes wide and his lips parted in eagerness. The door of the cabin swung open, and a man stood in the opening. Drenched with shadow, Sisson could not recognize the man, but his cruel grin deepened.

"She's comin'—an' he's waitin' for her. An' me—I'm waitin' for both of 'em."

The girl neared the cabin now, and the man took a forward step. There could be no mistaking that broad-shouldered figure, that high-tilted chin. Then the girl hurried her steps, was on the porch. The man seemed to be speaking to her—gestured with his hand. Now both hurried into the cabin and closed the door. Just an instant—then the light was snuffed out.

Sisson waited just a few moments longer before he moved out into the clearing. He was sure that neither Buck Barton or Jean Ralston would be expecting anyone to come upon them. Whatever the cause of their meeting, they would be interested only in each other.

When the renegade deputy finally prodded his horse out of the brush, he rode hunched forward in his saddle, right hand resting upon the butt of his six-gun. He circled a little to the right to be out of the direct line of the window, but further than that he did not try to hide.

He pulled up at the south side of the little cabin, well away from the single blanketed window. He swung stiffly down. For a moment he flexed his muscles and limbered his rein-stiff fingers. Now he turned on his heel and made for the front of the cabin.

HE STEPPED noiselessly onto the narrow porch and tiptoed to the door. He put his ear to the slab, listening intently. He thought he caught the faint sound of mumbled words, but he could not be sure. His face was hard but his eyes narrowed. Gone was the grin of a little while before.

He counted upon Buck Barton being un-

armed—hoped that the man inside had neglected to buckle on his gun-belt this early in the morning. But even if Buck was heeled, the surprise would give Sisson all the odds he needed. He drew his right six-gun, and his left hand went out to the latch. He steeled himself as he lifted it softly.

There was a faint click, hardly discernible. Now he drew back his booted foot and kicked the door crashing open. He leaped inside, his gun swinging up. He caught the startled exclamation that came from the slender girl over near the table—heard the equally startled curse from Buck Barton, there before the fireplace.

Sisson wasted only a single glance at Jean Ralston. His attention was upon Buck Barton. His tension eased just a little as he saw that Buck's waist was devoid of gun-belt—that no weapon was in sight. Caught flat-footed, the deputy told himself. Jumped like a tenderfoot. That evil grin split his face again.

"Reach for the rafters, hombre!" His voice was hoarse and harsh.

Slowly Buck Barton's hands went high. He took a half step backward, his shoulders bracing against the stone mantel of the fireplace. Sisson edged to the center of the room, sweeping it with a swift glance. There was nobody in sight except Barton and the girl.

"Wasn't expectin' comp'ny, huh?" There was a humorless chuckle in his voice. "Figured you'd got clean away?"

Buck Barton shook his head, but did not answer. Sisson laughed softly again. "Bullet through yore back didn't do for you—lynchin' bee backfired. Got to thinkin' nothin' could stop you, huh?"

"Didn't look for a back-shooter to face me," Buck Barton agreed softly.

"Drilled you from the back because it was less fuss an' trouble," Sisson spluttered. "If you was heeled right now—"

"But I'm not," Buck Barton said, not raising his voice. "So I reckon you aim to take me an' Jean Ralston to Slash Gratton's place—to brag that you caught one of Tom Durham's deputies, an' the girl he's been houndin' for months."

A twisted, cunning grin crossed Sisson's face. He was beginning to really enjoy this. He shook his head. "Slash Gratton don't know you're a C. A. man. He thinks you're the Tomichi Kid. Buck Barton's shield is hangin' alongside Simms' an' Lassiter's in his office. But he'll be right glad to see Jean Ralston."

Buck Barton's face went hard. "Then you're aimin' on drillin' me. Luggin' my body in, an' tryin' to collect a reward for killin' the Tomichi Kid. Ain't you figured that someone'll know that the Tomichi Kid is—"

"Not a chance, feller! Nobody on this here range ever saw the Tomichi Kid but me. That 'wanted' circular you showed Link Freeman when you made yore deal with him looked a heap like you—enough to fool Freeman. An' Slash Gratton took Freeman's word for you. Nope, you're out o' luck. As far as Cobalt is consarned, you're the Tomichi Kid, right enough."

Buck Barton's hands had been dropping slowly as Sisson talked. Now his elbows were bent, and his hands were no higher than his shoulders. Sisson's eyes narrowed a little as he saw the movement. Then he grinned. Buck Barton was unarmed. Weak and wounded. Probably couldn't hold his hands high any longer.

Then Buck spoke again, still softly, slowly. "But Sheriff Wright was mighty close to believin' me. He's like to hold up the hangin' until—"

"There ain't goin' to be no hangin'—not this time. I'm drillin' you—an' takin' in yore carcass. Ain't afraid of ol' Wright. He's as dumb as a slick-ear dogie. Only holdin' down his job because folks feel sorry for him. But it's too much trouble to herd you to Cobalt. A lot easier to h'ist yore carcass acrost my saddle."

"You got it all worked out," Buck Barton grunted, his hands dropping still lower and his shoulders saggin as if with weariness. "Ain't much I can do. 'Had figured on blockin' Slash Gratton from stickin' up the stage an' trickin' Worth and McDonald out of that bullion. But it don't look like—"

"No chance, feller. You die—an' I get my cut of the bullion. Slash Gratton gets his gal, an' Sheriff Wright—"

BUCK BARTON'S hands were hanging loosely at his sides now. Apparently Sisson was a little overconfident. The six-gun in his fist was gripped loosely and his finger was not on the trigger. The renegade deputy was enjoying this too much to stop it quickly.

Slowly Buck Barton's right hand edged behind him. The fingers groped in the maw of the fireplace—found the butt of a six-gun hanging from a nail driven between two stones. He lifted it with a little twitch, and the butt nestled in his palm. His

eyes narrowed now to the thinnest slits, and his face was granite-hard. Jean Ralston, on beyond Sisson, caught the change in expression. Her breath came sharply. This was the moment she feared and dreaded. The moment that spelled the difference between Buck's life—and death.

"It's a right pretty plan, Sisson," Buck said, his voice as soft and smooth as silk. "A pretty plan—but you didn't figure on Aunt Molly Carter. You didn't think that her hatred could last out the years—that she'd never be content until the murderer of her husband—"

Sisson stiffened and his eyes glinted dangerously. "What has she got to do with it? Of course I gunned ol' Jack Carter—but he had it comin' to him. Figured he could pistol-whip our whole outfit. Rather get gunned than give up a few head of steers. Just a plain damned fool—an' got hisself drilled. Just like you're goin' to—"

Buck Barton's right hand snaked forward. The six-gun in his fist swung up until its muzzle yawned in Sisson's face. The deputy sheriff jerked erect, his eyes wide. He took a backward step—whirled and ducked as his own trigger finger tightened.

"Damn your double-crossin' soul!" he snarled. "You held out on me—you tricked—"

Sisson's six-gun roared. The bullet spatted against the stone where Buck Barton's back had been but an instant before—flattened, and dropped to the slab floor with a little thud. A mirthless laugh came from Buck's lips, as his own gun spoke.

The bullet caught Sisson's gun hand—drilled the knuckles from right to left—sent the gun hurtling from his mangled hand into the corner of the room. A high-pitched scream of fear and agony bubbled from Sisson's white lips. He grasped his right wrist with his left hand and held it high.

Again Buck Barton's gun swung slightly until it covered the man's heart. The trigger finger tightened the merest fraction. Sisson's eyes caught the movement, and he screamed again.

"Don't, Barton! Don't shoot! I'll—I'll—"

Buck Barton's expression did not change. Only his lips moved. "You're yelpin' for mercy now, huh? An' you're willin' to admit that I'm Buck Barton, an' not the Tomichi Kid?"

"Shore, you're Buck Barton! Honest, I never meant to drill you, Barton! I was only funnin' with—"

CHAPTER XXIII

THREE ON THE TRAIL

BUCK BARTON'S lips twisted contemptuously. He didn't take his eyes from the cringing man, but his voice was a little louder. "You can come out now, Wright—you an' Slim Bisbee an' Burke Talbot! You too, Bob Ralston! Reckon you've heard enough!"

A heap of blankets in a far corner erupted and Sheriff Wright, who had been buried beneath them, climbed stiffly to his feet. The door to the little lean-to at the back swung open, and Bisbee and Talbot stepped out. Sisson's face was gray with pain and fear. His eyes were wide, terror-stricken. He tried to speak, but the words would not come.

Sheriff Wright, face as black as a thundercloud, advanced stiffly. His gnarled old hands writhed as if for the feel of Sisson's throat. When he faced Sisson, his lips bared back from his teeth in a wolfish snarl. His left hand shot out and slapped the deputy venomously. Sisson screamed again—ducked and started to turn.

Wright's hand grasped him by the shoulder and spun him around. The sheriff's left hand darted out now. The thick fingers grasped the star, still pinned on Sisson's vest, and jerked it free.

"You damned hydrofoby skunk!" Wright rasped. "You damned thievin', murderin' polecat! Wearin' a star—ridin' as my deputy, an' playin' Slash Gratton's game at the same time! I trusted you, damn you—an' you betrayed me! Now I'm goin' to—"

"Steady, Sheriff!" Buck Barton said. "He's crooked, right enough—crooked as a corkscrew—but the law that you represent can handle him."

Sheriff Wright growled a deep-voiced curse as he thrust Sisson's star into his pocket. His hand still clamped tightly on the man's cringing shoulder. His face was still twisted with wrath. But he restrained himself with violent effort.

"You're right, damn it!" he grunted at last. "Firs' time I ever wanted to tear a man apart with my two hands. Firs' man I'll ever enjoy seein' hung."

Still holding tightly to Sisson, he half turned to Buck Barton. "What was that about some bullion—an' Gratton stickin' up a stage?" he asked.

Swiftly Buck Barton told him of the gold that McDonald had smuggled down from

the Lucky Dagger mine—of his plan to get it to the railroad—and how Slash Gratton aimed to trick him.

"But McDonald didn't say nothin' to me about it—didn't ask me to protect it!" Sheriff Wright snapped.

Buck Barton shook his head slowly. "They was afeared, Wright—an' you can see why, now. They figured Sisson wasn't as straight as he might be. An' they knowed you'd tell him if you heard about it."

A flush spread across the old officer's lined face. "They're right, Barton. I was a damned fool. But how did Slash Gratton find out?"

"Link Freeman. You heard what Sisson said about the express agent in Cobalt. He an' Sisson were both hooked up with Gratton."

Wright snorted angrily. He whirled Sisson around, jerked a set of handcuffs from the deputy's pocket and clamped them upon his wrists.

"I'll fix Freeman when we get back! But right now—" His eyes narrowed. "This is Saturday—an' Gratton is figurin' on stickin' up the stage this very mornin'—on takin' the bullion—"

BUCK BARTON nodded again. "Yeah an' it's too late to stop him now. Wouldn't be none surprised if he was jus' about draggin' down on the stage this very minute."

"We can't let him get away with that!" the sheriff rasped. "We've got to—"

"Easy, Wright! We'll give 'em enough rope to hang themselves by."

"What d'you mean, Barton?"

"Did you bring them extra six-guns, like Aunt Molly Carter suggested?"

Sheriff Wright nodded. "Sounded damn funny—but we lugged 'em along. Hangin' onto Bisbee's and Talbot's saddle-horns right now."

"Fine! Now here's what I've got in mind!" Buck Barton talked swiftly for a full ten minutes. And as the plan unfolded, the scowl faded from Sheriff Wright's brow, and a grin spread across his face. Excitement was mirrored in the eyes of Bisbee and Talbot. Only Jean and Bob Ralston listened silently.

"You got a head onto yore shoulders, Barton!" Wright grunted. "I wish Tom Durham would release you to be my deputy —when Sisson swings."

Buck Barton's eyes widened. Then he shot a glance at Jean Ralston. Something —maybe the light in the young rider's eyes —brought a faint tinge of pink to her cheeks, and her eyes dropped. A smile flicked Buck Barton's lips.

"I'd like a heap to live down on this range, Wright. Mebbeso Tom Durham might be willin'. But right now we've got other business to 'tend to." His eyes turned to Bob Ralston. "Reckon Bob an' Jean can keep watch on this here sidewinder till we get back."

Bob Ralston snapped erect and his chin came high. "I aim to be in at the showdown, Barton! Aim to drag down on Slash Gratton myself. I've got more to collect than—"

"Sorry, son," Sheriff Wright said kindly. "But this here job is right important, too. You ain't faced six-gun music—but you can hold a muzzle onto Sisson. An' we'll promise to do yore collectin'."

"I tell you, I'm—"

Jean Ralston spoke up quickly. "Buck and Sheriff Wright know best, Bob. I'm sure they're right. I know you'd rather be with them—but you'll do as they say."

Bob Ralston grumbled, but at last he nodded. "I don't like it—none. But I'll do it."

"Good boy," Wright approved. "An' now, Barton—"

"We'll ride! Keep under cover, but watch Slash Gratton an' his outfit. It's a matter of timin', an' that's got to be perfect."

Wright nodded. "I'll use my own irons to shackle Sisson's legs. Take no chances on him makin' a break—"

Then Sisson's pain-filled voice. "I'm bleedin' to death! Ain't nobody goin' to bandage my hand? Do you want me to—"

"Yore death wouldn't be no hardship on us," Wright grunted. "But we'll fix you up. Get you in good shape—for the rope."

When Sisson's wound was taken care of —when he was handcuffed and shackled, Wright turned to Bisbee and Talbot. "You bring the hosses up, fellers. Time we was gettin' started."

When the two punchers had stamped out of the room, he turned to Buck Barton. "I done forgot yore hurt, feller. Are you feelin' fit to ride? Can you set the saddle an' take the bumps? Seems to me Doc Winters 'lowed you was nigh to kickin' off."

A twisted smile played across Buck Bar-

ton's lips. "I'm too tough to kill, Wright. Like an ol' boot or a piece of whang leather. That there hole is dang nigh healed. I can ride!"

Jean Ralston was at Buck's side now. She looked up into his face, and there was a light in her eyes that sent the man's blood to racing through his veins. Without thought of Wright or Bob, his hands went out and grasped hers. For a moment neither spoke—just looked into each other's eyes.

Then Jean's voice, scarcely more than a whisper. "You are feeling all right, Buck? And you will be careful? If anything should happen, I'd—I'd—"

Buck Ralston smiled softly, and his fingers tightened on Jean's. "I'll be careful, Jean—mighty careful. Right now there's somethin' a heap more important than tryin' to get even with Slash Gratton. We'll get him, right enough—get him plenty. But I'll be back, an' then—"

Sheriff Wright was watching the pair, an understanding light in his old eyes. Then he made his voice more gruff than usual. "Time we was movin', Barton. Plenty of time to do yore courtin' after we're finished."

A faint flush painted Buck Barton's cheeks, and Jean Ralston dropped her eyes. Buck swung on his heel and followed Sheriff Wright to the door. Slim Bob Ralston still stood in the center of the room, six-gun swinging in his hand. Sisson, handcuffed and shackled, was on the edge of the bunk. And Jean had followed the three men almost to the door.

"Watch Sisson close, boy," Sheriff Wright grunted to Bob Ralston. "He's tricky. Plug him center, if he tries anything."

"He'll not get away," Bob answered. "But I'd a heap rather be ridin' with you."

"Yore job is important, an' we're countin' on you to do it well," Wright said evenly. Then after a second's pause. "If we don't come past here for you by mornin', you're to take Sisson to Cobalt. Understand?"

CHAPTER XXIV

SIX RIFLE-GUARDS

WRIGHT, Bisbee and Talbot astride their own horses, and Buck Barton on Sisson's animal, the four prodded across the clearing and disappeared in the brush and timber. The door of the cabin behind them closed. Buck Barton shot a backward glance at the very edge of the clearing, catching a last glimpse of Jean Ralston standing in the opening.

His heart beat high, and his blood coursed swiftly through his veins. That final moment back there in the cabin, when he held Jean's hands and heard her soft words, had told him something he had not dared to expect. He knew he loved Jean Ralston—had felt that love growing, filling his mind, even before he discovered she was not an outlaw's woman. That night in Aunt Molly Carter's little home, when he looked up into Jean's eyes, he knew there'd never be another woman for him.

But now he was just as certain that love was returned. It was all there plainly in her tone, in the words of concern she had whispered, in the feel of her warm fingers in his. A smile of happiness, the first that had crossed his lips for weeks, softened his face. Sheriff Wright, glancing back at the young rider, knew it too. He shook his head. Love was not a good companion on a mission like this.

But now Buck Barton forced all thoughts except of the matter in hand from his brain. He prodded past Sheriff Wright, and took his place at the head of the column. Only a few twinges of pain, a stiffness in his shoulder, reminded him of the wound that had almost rubbed him out.

The four grim riders followed the dim, twisting trail through the tangle, until they came out upon the rim of Skull Canyon. They pulled to a stop well back in the brush, and Sheriff Wright slipped from his saddle. He inched forward, keeping under cover as much as possible. Back in the brush, the other three sat their saddles, ears and eyes alert for any sound or movement.

Wright reached the canyon rim—flattened himself behind a slab of rock with only his eyes above it. For a full two minutes he stretched there, not moving so much as a finger. Then he slid back, came up to a crouch and sped back into the timber.

Buck Barton looked his question at the old officer. Wright shook his head. "Looks like they've already been an' gone, Buck. Plenty of tracks down there—tracks of stampin' horses an' slidin' wheels. And marks where the stage was turned around in the trail. Likely they're mighty nigh to Slash Gratton's place by now."

Buck Barton nodded. "I figured as much. We'll be gettin' on."

Once more the four riders took to the tumbled high country. This time they kept well away from the beaten trails, and made use of all the cover they could find. It was not likely that Slash Gratton would have guards out. The outlaw leader would never suspect that his plan was known. But it was foolish to take chances.

Instead of coming upon the hideout high in the hills from the front, Sheriff Wright and the three drifted down the steep slope in the back, taking to twisting slashes and thickly timbered stretches. Buck Barton was certain that their movements could not have been seen even if guards were on the alert.

It was half past three by Sheriff Wright's watch when they pulled up at last in a thick clump of brush at the edge of the hundred-yard clearing around the cluster of buildings. Buck Barton was in the lead now, and he swept the clearing with narrowed eyes from the very edge.

There was no movement around the buildings or at the corral. He turned to Sheriff Wright. "Don't look like nobody's to home. I wonder—"

Burke Talbot broke in. "Somebody's down to the saddle house. Squattin' there by the door. Looks like a heap of blankets from here, but I seen him move."

Buck Barton swung around in his saddle. His narrowed eyes picked out the huddled form now—watched closely and caught another movement. Now, knowing what to look for, he searched the clearing again. At least three men were down there, two of them near the saddle house and another down beside the corral.

"Slash Gratton has been here—an' gone," Buck said at last. "If he hadn't, them hombres would be excited—movin' around. He's been here—an' the guards he took off the stage are shut up somewhere. Likely in the saddle house."

Sheriff Wright nodded. "Yeah. But what we goin' to do about it?"

For a moment Buck Barton was silent. Then a smile without humor crossed his lips. "Them gun-belts an' filled holsters you brought, Wright. I figured they'd fit snug around the waists of the stage guards. Our job is to get 'em down to the saddle house—an' into them hombres' hands."

Sheriff Wright's face hardened. "We've only seen three of Slash Gratton's men down there—an' there's four of us. Looks to me like the best idea would be to ride down there, six-guns foggin'."

BUCK BARTON shook his head. "Likely we could down 'em, Wright. But one might get away—might let Slash Gratton know. Things have got to look just the same to Gratton, when he tools that stage into the clearing. We've got to get him dead to rights—got to take things slow an' careful."

Wright nodded agreement. "But how, Barton? We can't just ride—"

Buck Barton swung stiffly from his saddle. He flexed his arms—squared his shoulders. The ride had not harmed him. His wound throbbed a little, but no more than it had back in the cabin. And strangely, he felt much stronger than when they started.

"Let me have them gun-belts, Bisbee. I'm headin' for the saddle house. The rest of you set tight. Keep out of sight. When Slash Gratton gets back, it'll be time to start the fireworks. The minute they unhook the team an' put the hosses in the shed, you head for the clearin'."

"But you—"

"I'll be in the saddle house."

"What? Don't be a damned fool, Barton! Slash Gratton'll—"

Buck smiled grimly and shook his head. "If things work right, he won't know it until the door opens. He'll look for six unarmed stage guards. Instead, seven of us, all heeled, will jump him. Seven, along with the three of you, will make ten. That ought to be enough."

Sheriff Wright's eyes narrowed. "Slash Gratton an' five men on the stage. Three that we know of down there. Odds look about right. Ten to ten."

"An' don't forget, we'll have surprise on our side. That's worth a half-dozen guns."

Wright nodded. "It might work—provided you can make it. But with that hole through yore shoulder—"

"I'll make it!" Buck Barton answered confidently.

As Wright and his two companions watched, Buck Barton circled the clearing until the saddle house and sheds were between him and the house. He remembered, from his few hours at Slash Gratton's hideout—knew the lay of the house and outbuildings perfectly. Remembered, too, the shallow, twisting draw that crossed the clearing.

He ducked low and streaked from the

timber. Fifty yards ahead was a low boulder. He made it to that bit of cover, and crouched there for a dozen heartbeats. Apparently he had been unseen. He edged out. Another fifty yards would bring him to the head of the draw. He raced for that —reached it and dropped to the bottom.

His heart thumped against his ribs, and his breath came in heaving gasps that sent pangs of agony through his wounded shoulder. But his teeth set grimly. Plenty of time to rest, to get well, after this deal was cleared up. When no bellowing reports, no searching bullets broke the silence, he got to his feet. Now, hunching low and making his way slowly and cautiously, he followed the path of the slash.

At times it was no more than three feet deep, and he crawled along its floor across those stretches. In other places the draw reached a depth of nearly ten feet. There he could walk erect and speed his pace. A good hundred yards of this twisting, turning path. Now, where the rim flattened out, he caught a glimpse of the house. It was no more than a good stone's throw to the right.

"Ought to be mighty nigh even with the saddle house," Buck Barton told himself.

He stopped for a moment, his brow furrowed in concentration as he brought back the detailed picture of the clearing and the scattered buildings. The saddle house, he remembered, had a narrow window at the back, the side farthest from the main house. Should be considerable brush and weeds right up to the squat building.

Cautiously he inched up the slope of the draw. With only his eyes above the rim, he swept the clearing. The saddle house was no more than thirty feet in front of him, blocking out sight of the house and horse shed. Only part of the corral, one end of the bunghouse and a corner of the blacksmith shop were visible. A thin, edgy smile crossed Buck Barton's face.

Hitching his gun-belt up a little higher, pulling his broad-brimmed J. B. a little lower over his eyes, he crawled out of the protecting slash. He tried wriggling on his belly for a little way, but it was too painful and slow. He got to his hands and knees—then to his feet. He drew a breath of relief when he realized that the saddle house still hid him from most of the clearing.

Now he quickened his pace, still keeping low and letting his right hand hover close to his gun-butt. A dozen breathless seconds. He straightened squarely against the back wall of the little saddle house. For a moment he flattened himself against the slabs, his ears attuned. It seemed that he could catch the mumble of voices, but he was not sure.

Inch by inch, he made his way along the wall until the dingy little window was just ahead. He ducked down—then came up with his nose almost flattened against the glass. For a moment he could see nothing inside the gloomy little building. Then slowly objects began to emerge from the darkness.

FIRST the saddles hanging on their pegs. Then the bench with its tools for repairing gear. Now a row of other objects on the floor over next to the east wall. His eyes narrowed. Strangely like long bed-rolls, or— His breath came sharply, for one of those objects moved.

"The guards—hog-tied an' stretched out!" he muttered beneath his breath. "Six of 'em, all in a row!"

He ducked down again, and waited with alert ears, searching eyes. Once he thought he caught a sound of a voice, as if someone spoke in an even, unexcited tone to another. But it was not repeated. Then dead silence for a full minute. Now Buck Barton straightened once more. This time he examined the window carefully. A twisted smile split his face.

Slash Gratton was plenty sure of his ropes. For the window was neither latched nor barred. Slowly, carefully he lifted on the cross-piece. The window stuck for a breathless moment—then slid up with a creak that sounded loud in his ears. For a tense moment he stood there silently, his left hand on the window and his right on the butt of his six-gun.

Then he breathed a bit easier, for no one had come charging around the corner—no sound reached him from in front where the single guard was stationed. He pushed upward again. Now the window was completely opened. He looked at it—wondered if he could wriggle through. The opening was small, but there was no other way.

He took the half-dozen gun-belts from his shoulder and let them down softly inside. He was conscious of several pairs of eyes watching him from that row of bound men now, but not a sound came from them. A thin smile flicked his lips. Steady, dependable men, he thought—not excitable or flighty.

He unbuckled his own gun-belt and dropped it beside the others. Now he hoisted himself up and into the narrow opening. The pressure against his wounded chest was agonizing, but he stifled any sound. Inch by painful inch, he pushed his way through. Now he was halfway through —then, as his arms stretched downward, he balanced across the sill.

His fingers touched the floor—then his palms. Another heave. His knees scraped the rough slab—then his shins—now his toes hooked over the sill while he steadied himself. He heard the quick breathing of the bound men, a soft whisper from one of them that he could not make out.

Cautiously he lifted his feet, first the right and then the left. He catwalked down down the wall beneath the window, resting his weight on his hands. Then his feet were upon the floor, and he straightened. He turned to let the window down.

But before he could touch it, the sash dropped with a clatter, and one of the small panes flew out to land on the floor beside his feet. The crash of broken glass sounded as loud as an explosion in his ears. He caught the startled exclamation from the outlaw at the front of the building—heard the pound of his feet as he circled the saddle house.

Buck Barton crouched low, flat against the wall beneath the window. His six-gun swung in his hand as he waited tensely. The footsteps were nearer now—just outside the window. The crouching man held his breath as he waited. For an instant there was dead silence. Then the light from the window was blotted out. Buck heard the sharp breathing of a man almost above him.

He leaned back a little, looking up toward the window. And even as he looked, the window screeched as a man heaved it open. Buck's six-gun swung back silently. Now a head thrust through the opening—a hard-bitten face, with beady eyes that blinked against the gloom.

"What the hell's—"

The growled words broke off short, as Buck's gun swung up and sideways, clipping the man on the left temple. A gurgling curse, as the man slumped down, his fingers clutching at the window sill. Buck leaped to his feet, reached through the opening and grasped the unconscious outlaw by the collar. With grim effort, he dragged him through the narrow opening and laid him on the floor of the saddle house.

Then for a full three minutes, Buck Barton crouched beside the man, gun ready for quick action if another outlaw appeared. But apparently this lone hombre was entrusted with guarding the prisoners. At last Buck drew a long, quavering breath, and straightened. Then he turned toward the man on the floor.

"Good work, feller." The voice was low and calm.

Buck Barton grinned crookedly as he stepped to the man's side. He looked down in the half gloom—saw a rugged, square-jawed face and a pair of steady eyes peering up at him. He stooped, and his fingers busied themselves with the thongs.

"Not so good," he grunted. "Damned awkward, lettin' that window drop. Might have spoiled the whole deal."

"Mebbe—but it was good to look at," the prisoner grunted.

Then he sat up and rubbed his bruised wrists where the thong had cut deep. Buck Barton was busy loosing the rest of the six, and in a few minutes they were all on their feet, but as silent and as cautious as Apaches on the war trail.

"Tie up that long-rider," Buck ordered. "Better gag him. Then grab yoreselves a gun-belt an' what goes with it. We're settin' tight—but ready—for a spell."

CHAPTER XXV

TWO CAPTIVES

THE JOB down at Cobalt came off according to schedule, with no fuss or excitement. The stage with its driver and six strange gun-guards drove up to the bank. Sam Worth, the banker, McDonald of the Lucky Dagger mine, and Link Freeman, the express agent, met it. Only those three in the little town knew that it was coming—knew its mission.

Quickly and efficiently they, with the help of the guards, loaded the bullion in the old Concord. Hardly a word was spoken. Once the driver talked for a moment from the corner of his mouth to Link Freeman, and received short, terse answers.

"Heard anything of the Tomichi Kid—or the gal?"

"Not a word. Sisson thinks he's got a line. Ridin' the hills a-huntin' now."

"Which direction?"

"Up beyond Skull Canyon. Wouldn't say just where."

"Mebbe we'll see him. We're circling—coming back that way."

Just those few words—nothing more. The big man climbed back to the boot of the stage and gathered up the lines. The guards took their places inside and on top. The team picked up speed, and clattered out of town on the north trail toward the railroad. Sam Worth and McDonald watched it leave, grim but satisfied expressions on their faces. At last they had outwitted the gang of stickup men.

Link Freeman watched with just as much interest, but there was a hint of a grin on his narrow face, a glint of amusement in his eyes. He could picture those two men when they learned that the stage had not reached the railroad—when they knew that their trick had failed.

For a half-dozen miles or more the lumbering stage kept to the trail. Then, when Slash Gratton on the boot was sure that there was no one in sight, he swung the team from its path and headed into a dim brush-choked trail that led steeply up the slope through the timber.

He followed it for a good mile—then swung back to the southwest. The trail was no plainer here—rough, blocked with rocks and brush, but passable at a slow gait. After a half hour of this tough going, the stage struck a smoother, plainer trail that almost paralleled Skull Canyon. It was the same path that Bob Ralston had taken when he left Buck Barton at the cabin—the same trail upon which Sisson had recaptured him.

And now Slash Gratton turned and spoke to the men on the stage behind him. "Sisson is huntin' the Tomichi Kid and Jean Ralston somewhere up here. Keep your eyes wide. Maybe we can pick him up—find out what luck he's had."

"I don't trust that hombre no further'n I can throw a bull by the tail," one of the men grunted.

Slash Gratton grunted. "Don't need to trust him. We'll use him as long as he's any good to us. After that—"

The outlaw leader turned his attention to the team now. The trail twisted and turned through the timber and brush, skirting upthrust boulders and circling deep-cut slashes that led down toward the canyon. A mile or more of this—then a stretch that was almost clear. Off to the left, no more than a quarter of a mile ahead, was a little log cabin.

Slash Gratton looked at the cabin at first with little interest. Deserted cabins were no novelty in the high country. But suddenly his eyes narrowed. It was along here somewhere that Sisson had overtaken young Bob Ralston. He had spoken something of a cabin—just what escaped Gratton's memory for a moment.

But couldn't it be possible that the Tomichi Kid knew of this place, too? Couldn't he be hiding there now? Gratton shot a glance back at the men riding the top of the stage.

"We'll swing over to the cabin. Time to let the team take a breathing spell, anyhow. I want to take a look around—just for luck."

The lumbering stage creaked off the trail and headed straight for the little structure. Slash Gratton's eye held upon it for any sign of movement, but none came. Apparently no one had been there for a long time. He pulled the team to a halt at the hitchrail, leaned over and wrapped the lines around the brake lever.

Now he climbed down. "Stay put a minute, men," he grunted. "Won't take me long."

He ducked under the hitchrail, unconscious of the pair of wide, frightened eyes that watched him from a chink beside the door. Unconscious too of the whisper that carried only to the others in the cabin.

"He's coming, Bob! What—what can we do? Bob, he'll—"

BOB RALSTON stood just in front of the bunk, when Slash Gratton opened the door cautiously. Sisson, shackled and handcuffed, lay stretched out on the bunk. And Jean Ralston cowered in a far corner. For just a little the outlaw leader saw nothing in the thick gloom. But in a moment his eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness.

They opened wider now, and his lips twisted into a mask of cruelty and wrath. For he was staring straight into the muzzle of Bob Ralston's six-gun. Bob knew that the big man had seen, and his voice came shaky and high-pitched.

"Back up, Slash Gratton! Come a step inside, an' I'll—"

Slash Gratton's wide shoulders squared. His feet were planted firmly, wide apart on the slab floor. His right hand moved slowly down toward his holster, fingers crooked for the feel of his gun-butt.

"You damned young fool!" he snarled. "You think you and your one gun can stop me—"

"I'll drill you center, if you come a step closer!"

"Yeah? And what will it get you? There are six more men outside in the stage. A shot will bring them running hell-bent. They'll cut you down—fill your hide so full of lead it'll take a derrick to lift you!"

"I tell you, I'll shoot—"

Jean Ralston, wide-eyed and white-faced, stepped hesitantly to Bob's side. Her voice was low—hardly more than a husky whisper. "He's right, Bob. They'll kill you! You can't fight them all. There's nothing—"

Slash Gratton's face twisted into a leering grin. "She's plumb right, bub! You'd better holster that—"

Neither Bob Ralston nor Jean had noticed Sisson, wriggling silently on the bunk right behind the youngster. But Slash Gratton did, and his grin grew wider with evil amusement. He spoke again, more to divert their attention than to persuade Bob Ralston.

"You might drill me, feller, like you promise. But that wouldn't do you no good."

Sisson was lying squarely across the bunk now, and his shackled legs were drawn back, knees against his chin. Gratton knew he was ready. He nodded.

"I'm giving you a chance, bub—and if you don't take it—"

Sisson's legs straightened with a vicious snap. His booted heels caught Bob Ralston squarely in the small of the back, knocking him forward and to his knees. The six-gun in the youngster's hands bellowed sullenly, but the bullet plowed into the slab floor.

And Slash Gratton charged forward at the same instant. His huge arms flailed out—a fist caught Bob Ralston on the left jaw, knocking him flat on his back. Gratton snatched up the gun that had fallen from the boy's nerveless hand. He thrust it into his own waistband.

Now he grasped the youngster by the collar and jerked him to his feet. His fist drew back again, but he held the blow. The grin came back to his face. His voice held a note of grim amusement.

"Better than stopping lead, feller."

"You — you bully — you murdering—" Jean Ralston's voice was choked.

"Steady, sister!" Slash Gratton growled. "I've never slapped down a woman yet, but it's not too late—"

Feet pounded on the narrow porch outside. A half-dozen men crowded up to the door. Slash Gratton, still holding Bob Ralston by the collar, turned to them.

"I've found a pair of strays, hombres—and our old friend Sisson. Looks like Sisson is mighty glad to see us."

The men pushed inside now, and Gratton turned Bob Ralston over to them. Jean had retreated to the corner and was crouching there, trying to keep out of sight. Gratton whirled on his heel and looked down at Sisson. A mirthless chuckle came from his lips.

"Kind of losing your grip, Sisson. Letting a woman and a pasty-faced kid hog-tie you. I figured you were more of a man than that."

"It wasn't them!" Sisson burst out. "It was Buck—the Tomichi Kid—an' Sheriff Wright, along with a couple of others! They tricked me—got the drop—"

THE GRIN faded from Slash Gratton's face. "The Tomichi Kid, huh? And old Wright! But why did they leave you here? What happened? I thought you were—"

"I got a straight tip the Tomichi Kid was meetin' Jean Ralston in this cabin!" Sisson spluttered. "But somebody double-crossed me!" In swift words Sisson told the outlaw leader just what had happened.

When he had finished, Gratton was silent for a full minute, his brow furrowed in concentration. Then the words slid through tight-clenched teeth.

"They rode for the hideout—the three of them, huh? Likely they figure on loosing those stage guards from the saddle house. Taking along gun-belts for those hombres, too. Shouldn't have much trouble in doing that. Only three men on watch—Slemp, Kroch and Merkel."

"But they won't know you've found out—that you've—"

"Shut up!" Slash Gratton grunted. "Let me think!" Again a long pause. But now a smile without humor quirked the corners of his mouth.

"Yeah. They won't know. And we won't tell them. We'll drive into the clearing, just as if nothing had happened—except—"

"Except what?" Sisson spluttered impatiently.

"Except that Bob and Jean Ralston will be riding on top of the stage, along with four of our men."

"I—see!" Sisson spoke slowly as if enjoying the thought. "They'll not dare to drag down on us, for fear of drillin' the gal an' the kid! Plenty smart thinkin', Slash!"

The outlaw leader nodded. "We'll keep them right with us until we're inside the house. After that, they can try their damnedest. I wouldn't be afraid of fifty men, with those walls in front of me."

He turned to his men. "Load this pair onto the top of the stage. We'll be taking the trail."

"But ain't you goin' to knock these here irons off me?" Sisson almost wailed.

A twisted smile crossed Slash Gratton's lips. "Ought to leave 'em on you, to remind you how dumb you've been. But maybe the memory'll stay with you."

CHAPTER XXVI

"YOU'RE THE RAMROD!"

BACK in the saddle house at Slash Gratton's hideout, Buck Barton stood at the little window in the front. From there he could see most of the clearing—most of the house, the corral and the bunkhouse, and the trail that led out of the timber into the clearing.

Once or twice he saw a man moving about up at the house. Again another crossed the little stretch from the main building to the bunkhouse. He thought that this man shot a glance down toward the saddle house, but he was not sure. He tensed as he waited. But the man stayed a little while—then retraced his way back to the main house. Buck breathed easier.

The six stage guards crowded around him, and he talked as he watched. Shortly, tersely he told them what had happened—what they were up against. The first man he had released seemed to be the leader, and it was he who spoke for the rest.

"They jumped us without givin' us a chance. Took our guns, an' hog-tied us in this here dump. If we don't even things up, we jest as well not go back to Rawleigh. We'd get hooted out o' town."

"You'll get yore chance!" Buck Barton said grimly. "Get yore chance to jump 'em like they did you. We'll let 'em drive into the clearing—wait until they're unhookin' the team from the stage. They'll not be lookin' for ten men with gun-filled fists!"

"An' me, I aim to get me that big buffalo bull who ramrods the outfit!" the leader of the guards said gruffly.

"Any but him!" Buck Barton broke in. "He's my meat—the hombre who gunned my two best friends—the man who's—who's— The words stuck in his throat when he thought of what Slash Gratton had done to Jean Ralston. He could only clench his hands into tight fists.

The afternoon dragged to the men inside the saddle house. They chafed for action. Buck Barton held them down with difficulty. The hours seemed like days. But gradually the sun dropped down the western sky. Only two hours of daylight left, when Buck Barton first caught the sound.

He stiffened, there by the window, and the breath hissed from his lungs. The men behind him caught his excitement. They crowded close, but Buck held them back.

"Creakin' leather an' clatterin' trace-chains! The stage is comin'!" he said softly.

His eyes narrowed as they held upon the trail where it came out of the timber. At first it was only shadowy movement back in the tangle. Then he could make out the leaders of an eight-horse team. Now the boot of the stage, and the burly man who sat on it.

"Slash Gratton—toolin' the team!" he whispered to the tense men behind him.

The stage lumbered forward. The first men on top came into Buck Barton's vision. Then— A gasp came from his throat. His eyes went wide, and the color drained from his face.

"Jean Ralston—an' Bob!" The words were hardly more than a whisper.

"What's that you're sayin'?" Druhard, the leader of the gun guards, broke in swiftly.

"They've got Jean Ralston an' Bob! They've caught 'em—an' Sisson must be—" He stopped short.

Of course they had found Sisson, too. Likely had a tip from down in Cobalt that Sisson would be at the cabin. Maybe Link Freeman had found out. Then the whole implication smashed down upon him. If they found Sisson, they knew that he, Wright and the two punchers were close, waiting for them. That was the reason they had put Jean and Bob on top of the stage!

He whirled on his heel and spoke quickly to the gun guards. "Get back onto the floor, you hombres! Quick! They don't know I've been here! Don't know I've turned you loose! Hide yore six-guns, an' stay put until I call on you!"

"But you—" Druhard began.

"I've got to get out! Got to stop Wright, Bisbee an' Talbot from rammin' their heads into sudden death! Listen! Do just what I tell you. Wait until you hear the whistle

of a Mexican quail—three times in quick succession. Then bust down the door an' come a-hellin'!"

Druhard nodded. "You can count on us, feller!"

Buck Barton waited only until the stage was hidden from the back window. Then he hoisted the unconscious outlaw through the narrow opening, and clambered after him. He dropped flat on the ground, silent and motionless for a dozen breaths. Then he was up to a crouch, and streaking for the shallow draw that had brought him here. He scuttled down into it, and lay still for a moment.

THE exertion had set his legs to trembling, had brought a twinge of agony to his wounded chest. But he set his teeth, and his face was hard. Just a scant three seconds—then he was on his feet again. With the speed and silence of a sand lizard, he darted down the draw. He whirled at the spot where he had entered it on his down journey, and shot a glance up the slope.

His breath came in great heaving gasps, but there was enough of it to give voice to quick, sharp words. "Wright! Hold up! Wait!"

The old sheriff who was edging his horse forward to charge down upon the clearing, pulled into a sudden stop. The two grim men behind him dragged back on their reins.

"Thought you was down there, hombre! Didn't hear nothin' of you! Figured you'd made it!"

"I—did!" Buck Barton gasped. Then he clambered up and stood beside Sheriff Wright's horse. Quickly he told the old officer what had happened.

Sheriff Wright's face went grim and hard. "Kind o' puts a crimp in our chances, Barton! Looks like we've—"

Buck shook his head swiftly. "Don't stop us none, Wright—only slows us down a little—makes us change our plans."

"But Slash Gratton knows—"

"Shore. He knows we're holed up somewhere in sight of the clearin'. Knows we've seen Jean an' Bob Ralston—that we've figured out that Sisson has told him everything he knows."

"Then what—"

"Gratton will figure that we'll either come a-hellin'—or run out on the whole deal. One thing he won't know—that the stage guards in the saddle house are untied, an' that they've got filled holsters."

"Yeah. But he'll be watchin' for us—waitin' to drag down on the first hombre that shows his face."

Buck Barton shook his head. "Slash Gratton thinks he's about the toughest hombre in the whole high country. Got the idea that everybody is scared of him. When we don't show up while it's still daylight, he'll decide that we didn't want none of his medicine."

"Maybe you're right, Buck. But I ain't so shore—"

"That's the way we'll play it, anyhow. We'll stick here until dusk—about an hour. Then we'll ride down."

"You plumb shore about them gun-guards? Will they stay put?"

"They're all set. Good men to tie to. They'll draw cards when the goin' gets rough."

"All right, son," the old sheriff said resignedly. "It's yore party. But I hope you know what you're doin'."

Buck Barton turned abruptly to Bisbee and Talbot. "You waddies stickin'?"

A crooked grin crossed Slim Bisbee's lean face. "I been honin' to get me a long-rider for a long time. Looks like the best chance I've had."

"Wouldn't miss it for nothin'," Burke Talbot growled. "An' I'm 'specially lookin' forward to throwin' down on Sisson."

Buck Barton nodded in satisfaction. Good men, all three of them, he thought. Men who could be depended upon to stay put, no matter what happened. He turned and swept the down slope and the clearing with narrowed eyes.

Slash Gratton and his men had unhooked the eight-horse team now, and were unloading the stage. A muttered curse came from his lips, as he saw Sisson and two of the outlaw outfit climb from the stage, after handing out three heavy strong-boxes.

"Laughin' to himself!" he grunted. "But it'll be comin' from the other side of his mouth afore long!"

Two men came down from the main house to meet the others now. Buck Barton could see one of them gesturing vehemently—turn toward the saddle house and motion with his hand. He saw Slash Gratton and Sisson swing in that direction.

"They've discovered that the guard they set is gone," Buck grunted. "Wonderin'

what happened to him. If they take a notion to look—"

But now apparently Gratton decided that there were other things more important than worrying about a missing guard. After all, the saddle house was tightly locked. And the prisoners were bound hand and foot. He headed toward the main house again, herding Jean and Bob Ralston ahead of him. A slow, quavering breath of relief came from Buck's lips.

"Luck's with us, fellers," he said softly.

For another hour the four men watched from the tangle of brush and timber up the slope from the clearing. Men moved about —to the bunkhouse down to the horse shed, to the corral. But they did not go near the saddle house. Buck wondered a little at that, but he blessed his luck that it was so.

Dusk was creeping up the slopes, filling the valleys with purple shadow. The house down in the clearing was indistinct now, and even as Buck looked, a ruddy light flared up—gleamed from the window.

He turned to Sheriff Wright and the two riders. "Time we was movin'. I'll take the lead."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE LOBOS' LAIR

DOWN in the main house, Slash Gratton and his outfit were starting a night of celebration. It was a great day for the burly outlaw leader. Not only had he tricked Sam Worth and old McDonald out of twenty thousand dollars in bullion, but he had brought back Jean and Bob Ralston. Gratton was very well satisfied with himself—and with events.

If only the Tomichi Kid had crossed his path—if only he had gunned down that hombre, the day would have been complete. But now, with supper over and the jug of Miner's Rest forty-rod on the table, he could overlook that single slip-up. He slumped down in his big chair, and a wide grin crossed his face.

He shot a glance at the slim girl and the white-faced youngster who huddled close together over in a far corner. It fed his vanity to see them so plainly frightened. His beady eyes twinkled with evil amusement.

"How does it seem to be back home, Jean, honey?" he bellowed.

A faint flush painted Jean Ralston's cheeks. She dropped her eyes and did not answer. Slash Gratton chuckled, and turned his gaze to Sisson who sat across the table. There was no merriment on the renegade deputy's face. Instead, a look that was half fear seemed to lurk deep in his eyes.

"What's eating you, Sisson?" Gratton asked. "You look like you'd lost your last peso in a stud game. You're not figuring I'll beat you out of your cut of the bullion?"

Sisson shook his head. "Buck—the Tomichi Kid. It ain't right. He'd ought to've showed up afore this. Him an' ol' Wright, along with Bisbee an' Talbot, rode down here from the cabin. I know they watched us come in. But we ain't seen hide nor hair—"

Slash Gratton threw back his head and laughed loudly. "You're scared of your shadow, Sisson. That Tomichi Kid has run out on the whole deal. Likely by this time he's crossed the ridge and is headed for the border."

Sisson shook his head, and his eyes darted to the window. "I don't know, Gratton. That hombre ain't scared of nothin' or nobody. I know him a heap better than you. He ain't give up. He's skulkin' around—"

"Drink up, Sisson! Forget the Tomichi Kid. We're here, safe and sound. The bullion is here—and so are Jean and Bob."

Sisson glanced down at the table—then up into Slash Gratton's eyes. "Them stage guards, now—we ain't looked in on them. An' Slemp ain't showed up, either. I wonder—"

Slash Gratton shook his head again, laughed but not quite so loudly. He turned to the seven or eight men lounging in the room. His gaze singled out two.

"You, Kroch and Merkel! Go down to the saddle house and herd that outfit of dumb dogies up here. Sisson won't be satisfied until we've looked them over. Take a lantern with you. Untie their feet, but leave their wrists thonged."

The two men grinned with anticipation. When they stamped out of the room, Slash Gratton turned his attention to baiting Jean and Bob again. He rose from his chair and strode across to stand right in front of them. Bob did not look up, but Jean met his gaze steadily.

"You tried to get away—and you see what luck you had," he growled. "You're back here, right where you started. From now on, it's going to be plenty tough for

you. Yeah—and for that old woman who holed you up. She'll wish she'd never seen—"

Jean Ralston's eyes blazed and the color came flooding back into her face with her anger. "If you touch Aunt Molly Carter—if you so much as look like you're going to, I'll—"

Slash Gratton laughed harshly. "What can you do, girl? You—or that Tomichi Kid who seems to be so damned interested in getting you out of here. Hell of a friend he turned out to be. Turned and run, the minute things got a little tough. You've seen the last of him!"

"He didn't run!" Jean Ralston flared. "He's not afraid of you—not afraid of anyone! I haven't seen the last of him—and neither have you! When the right time comes—"

SLASH GRATTON threw back his head—laughed loudly. "When the time comes!" he jeered. "The time has come and—"

The sound of feet outside halted Slash Gratton's words. He whirled on his heel, a grin spreading across his face. Sisson was standing, too, leaning across the table—a tense, half-frightened look about him. The rest of the men were watching the door.

"McDonald's pretty boys!" Gratton chuckled. "Wondering what's going to happen to them."

And Slash Gratton was partly right—but not wholly. It was McDonald's stage guards, right enough. But Kroch and Merkel were not herding them back. Kroch and Merkel were sleeping soundly, if not peacefully. They had headed for the saddle house, wide grins of anticipation on their faces.

Kroch had carried the lantern, and Merkel held the key to the heavy padlock. They stopped at the door, and Kroch held the light close. Merkel leaned down to fit the key in the lock. Both were intent upon their task. But even if they had been alert, likely they could have changed nothing.

For the footsteps behind them were as soft and silent as catamount's. There was no creak of leather, no clink of metal, hardly a whisper of breath from Sheriff Wright and Buck Barton as they slipped from around the corner of the saddle house and stepped up behind the two.

Even as the key turned and the lock clicked open, two six-guns swept high—descended upon the skulls of the two outlaws. Hardly a grunt as the men collapsed in limp heaps upon the ground. Nor was a word spoken, as Buck Barton stepped over Kroch's body, and swung the door of the saddle house wide.

His words were low and even. "All right, Druhard. You an' yore men can get up now."

"That you, Barton?" Druhard's low voice came from the darkness.

"Yeah. Me an' the Sheriff, along with Bisbee an' Talbot. Get onto yore hind legs. The showdown time has come."

There was little noise in the saddle house. But in a scant half-dozen seconds, six grim men stood in the circle of light from the lantern that Sheriff Wright had snatched up from Kroch's hand. He held it high, sweeping the six men swiftly. Then he nodded.

"They'll do!" he grunted.

Now he turned toward the brightly lighted house. Slim Bisbee and Burke Talbot slipped out of the gloom and stood beside him. Wright spoke from the corner of his mouth to Buck Barton.

"What's next, feller?"

"Stay put for a little spell. I'll scout the house. Get the lay of the place. When you hear a Mex quail whistle, head for the front door. I'll meet you, before you reach the porch."

While Wright and the eight others stood there beside the little building, Buck Barton faded into the darkness. He drifted silently to the main house—came to a crouch beneath the lighted open window. He caught Slash Gratton's taunting words directed at Jean Ralston, and a deadly impulse almost drove him to come up, six-gun blazing. He fought it down with almost physical effort.

Then he stepped back a half dozen paces. From there he could sweep the inside of the brightly-lighted room. A fixed, humorless smile came to his lips. A quail whistled softly. The men down by the saddle house moved out. Buck Barton met them halfway. Just for a moment they paused to listen to him.

Swiftly he told them the disposition of those in the room. Told them also what he meant for them to do. "Slash Gratton sent two hombres after you. He's got the idea that me an' Wright run out on the deal. We'll let him think so—for a little while. Count up to a hundred before you

move. You an' yore men go first, Druhard. Keep yore hands behind you like yore wrists were still thonged, until you're plumb inside. But see that yore six-guns are swingin' free in yore fists."

Then he spoke swiftly to Sheriff Wright. "You an' Bisbee an' Talbot stay behind until Druhard is inside. When they're set, you slip in to back up their play. Likely you'll have no trouble with any of 'em—except Slash Gratton an' Sisson. But remember, no matter what happens, Gratton is mine!"

"But if he starts gun play—" Wright began.

"He won't—not against odds. But I think I know what he will do, an' I'll be ready for him."

"You're the ramrod!" Wright grunted.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SHOWDOWN

AS BUCK BARTON whirled on his heel and darted into the darkness, he began to count along with Sheriff Wright. At fifty he was stepping lightly onto the back porch. At seventy-five he was inside, and slipping along a narrow, gloomy hallway. At ninety he opened a slab door and edged on noiseless feet into a little dark room with a musty smell that spoke of closed windows and doors.

A thin slash of light painted the rough floor over on the other side—light that seeped beneath a closed door. Beyond that door, Buck Barton knew the main room lay. Faint mumbling sounds reached his ears, and he catfooted across to lay his ear against the slabs.

The count was a hundred now. He knew Sheriff Wright and the others were moving toward the porch. He heard Slash Gratton break off his words short. He waited just a dozen breaths more—until the outside door opened and heavy feet stamped on the floor. He caught Slash Gratton's words as he backed to a far corner of the little room.

Slash Gratton had laughed harshly. "Old McDonald's pretty little gun-guards," he had bellowed. "But they don't look so pretty without their guns!"

Then the sounds faded as Buck drew back. But he could picture what was happening beyond that door. He could almost see the gun-guards break apart as Sheriff Wright, Slim Bisbee and Burke Talbot stepped up onto the porch. A faint smile flicked his lips. His ears strained for the next sounds—which should be—

It was. Sheriff Wright's voice boomed, reaching Buck Barton plainly. "Get 'em high, you pack of murderin' lobos! High—or we'll blast you to Kingdom Come!"

A high-pitched, fear-thin curse—the scuffle of feet—then the sullen bellow of a six-gun that rattled the windows—a scream that was half fear and half agony—a scream that died in a gurgle. Then Sheriff Wright's voice again.

"You, Slash Gratton! Reach—or you'll foller that polecat, Sisson!"

Now Slash Gratton's answer. "You won't drill me unless I drag my gun, Wright! I know your silly ideas—you won't shoot an unarmed man. And I'm reaching—but it'll do you no good!"

Buck Barton tensed, there in the darkness. It was just as he had planned. He had read Gratton's cunning correctly. He drew his own six-gun, as he crouched still lower in the corner.

Now feet thudded against the slab floor—the door to the dark little room crashed open, flooding it with light for an instant. A burly form leaped inside, and slammed the door closed behind him. A hoarse chuckle reached Buck Barton, now on his feet. Footsteps now, coming toward him.

"Stay put, Gratton!"

The footsteps ceased abruptly. For a dozen seconds there was no sound in the little room except the heavy breathing of Slash Gratton, there in the thick darkness. That humorless smile came back to Buck Barton's lips. He could almost picture Slash Gratton's puzzled, fear-twisted face. Knew almost exactly what Gratton was thinking—was doing.

The outlaw leader would be crouching now, his gun tightly clenched in his fist and pointing toward the spot from which he thought the voice had come. His piggish eyes would be straining to pierce the darkness—would be conjuring up a dozen different forms.

Buck Barton let him wait for a little, knowing that the big man's nerves were getting jumpier every second. Then he spoke from a spot a full six feet from where he had been before.

"You've got no chance, Slash Gratton! You'd better turn back into the main room—better face Sheriff Wright!"

Slash Gratton's six-gun bellowed, the trigger squeezed by a jumpy finger. The bullet plowed into the slab floor, a good three feet from where Buck Barton stood. The young puncher laughed shortly, harshly.

"You can't hit what you can't see, Gratton!"

Feet pounded out in the main room now. But Sheriff Wright's voice boomed high over the sounds. "He said Gratton was his—an' we're givin' him the chance! Stay put, you hombres!"

Slash Gratton shot again—five times, as fast as he could squeeze the trigger. The bullets sprayed the walls of the little room, but Buck Barton was crouched low in a far corner, and none came close to him.

"Yore gun's empty now, Gratton! An' you've still missed! You ain't gunnin' a C.A. man from behind now. You ain't cuttin' down Simms an' Lassiter!"

Apparently panic was fast gaining control of the big outlaw. Ready enough to swap lead with someone he could see, Gratton couldn't stand the pressure of this gunning for a phantom in the darkness.

"Damn you, who are you? Why don't you come into the light?"

"Scared, Gratton?" Buck Barton asked softly. "Feelin' like yore time is near? Rememberin' Simms an' Lassiter? Feelin' just a little twinge of conscience for the way you've treated Jean Ralston an' her brother Bob?"

"Damn you, who are you? What business is it of yours what—"

"Name of Buck Barton, Slash Gratton. Tom Durham's deputy. Simms an' Lassiter were my bes' friends—before you gunned 'em. My shield is hangin' alongside of theirs, right here in this room. I aim to take 'em all down, after I've drilled you. Aim to see they go back where they belong."

"Buck Barton! But the Tomichi Kid—"

"The Tomichi Kid was killed down on the line, Gratton—killed, just like the word was passed. You knowed me as the Tomichi Kid—but you was wrong. Sisson knowed me—Freeman knowed me. But they tricked you, same as I did."

SLASH GRATTON's voice grew high-pitched with fearful frenzy. "Damn you! Damn Sisson! Damn Freeman! Maybe you tricked me once—but I'll get the whole outfit of you! I'll—"

"Load yore six-gun, Gratton! I'm givin' you that much chance!" Buck Barton said softly, evenly.

He heard the deep-throated curse—caught the click of the cylinder, as Gratton fed cartridges into it. Then shuffling footsteps that seemed to be backing toward the door into the main room. Now a voice that he recognized—a voice that was fear-filled, almost hysterical, but still musical in spite of all that. It came from beyond the door.

"I can't leave him in there alone with Slash Gratton! He's hurt—he's no match for Gratton! I'm going—"

The door of the main room crashed open once more. A slash of orange light flooded the little office room. It brought Slash Gratton into bold relief, standing with his back toward it and facing the grim, straight-backed man across the dozen feet. Just for an instant Buck caught the slim form of Jean Ralston in the doorway. Then Sheriff Wright snatched her back out of the line of fire.

"You've got yore light now, Slash Gratton!" Buck Barton snapped. "Yore gun is loaded, an' in yore fist. Start the fireworks!"

"Damn you, I'll—" Slash Gratton's six-gun swept up as he spoke.

The thin smile was still on Buck Barton's lips. He waited until the outlaw's gun was waist high—until the man's finger was tightening on the trigger. Then his own gun moved with lightning speed. It came up, spitting flame and lead. Its report blended with Gratton's. But Buck Barton was the tiniest fraction of an instant faster.

Gratton's bullet slivered the slab at Buck's feet—but his own caught the huge outlaw squarely through the heart. Gratton jerked up on his heels as if a fist had caught him on the button — spun half around, and slumped in a motionless heap on the floor.

For a dozen heartbeats there was dead silence in the main room, and in the little office. Then a half-hysterical laugh that seemed to come from Sheriff Wright's tense lips. Now the shuffling of uneasy feet.

Buck Barton stepped toward the open door, speaking in an even tone, untinged by the excitement of the past seconds.

"Slash Gratton is done, Wright. An' you've got his outfit rounded up. I'll be takin' down these shields an' gun-belts."

But scarcely had he reached the wall where they were hung, when Jean Ralston darted through the door and stood uncertainly in front of him. Her eyes were wide

and still haunted by that deadly fear. Her face was white and her lips were tight-clenched to stop their quivering. Her hands stretched out toward Buck Barton uncertainly.

A slow smile, half of happiness and half of uncertainty, crossed Buck's face. He took a step toward her, arms outstretched. His lips moved, but he could not force the words from his dry lips.

Then Jean Ralston was in the circle of his arms. He drew her close. With his lips brushing her ear, he found his voice in a whisper that was for her alone. She looked up into his face, and a tremulous smile of relief and happiness transformed her white face.

Sheriff Wright coughed in the doorway, stifling the grin on his lined old countenance. Behind him Buck could catch a glimpse of the grim faces of the gun-guards, as they held Slash Gratton's outfit prisoners.

"Looks like the job's done, Barton," Sheriff Wright said. "Sisson tried to get away, an' I drilled him. Save the state the price of a rope, but I would have liked to see him dance on air. Looks like you've settled with Slash Gratton. McDonald's bullion is all here, an' we've got a half dozen or so prisoners. I'd say off-hand that this here huntin' trip was a success."

Buck Barton nodded, still holding Jean Ralston in his arms. "My job is done, Wright. The prisoners are yores. When I return these shields of Simms an' Lassiter to Tom Durham—"

"But you're not going back—you're not leaving me—us?" Jean Ralston cried, leaning back and looking into Buck's face.

He smiled down softly at her. "Just for a little while, Jean honey. Just long enough to report to Tom Durham—an' to take a little stake I've been savin' out of the bank. Seems like I heard you say the Anchor spread needed stockin'—an' maybe I can buy in as yore pardner, huh?"

Jean Ralston answered his smile. Her whispered answer reached his ears alone. "Not my partner, Buck—but my man!"

THE END

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COLT-SWIFT MEDICO

by HENRY M. TRUESDELL

Old Wolf Lazenby didn't want his kid to be a gunman, but he saw to it that young Joel could fan his Colts. And when Joel found that a medico sometimes had to feed 'em lead as well as sew 'em up, it looked as if killin' was more to his taste than doctorin'!

IT WAS as black as pitch through Howling Wolf Canyon and Joel Lazenby was letting the horse beneath him pick its footing, giving it its head.

Occasional flashes of lightning illumined the dim trail, showing the rider low bent over the horse's withers, one gloved fist gripping the horn of the saddle to steady himself. Lashed at the pommel there hung a small black grip—a doctor's satchel.

Riding a race with death, Joel Lazenby clung grimly to the horn, swaying with every plunge. The cayuse was holding the long, easy-

rolling gallop, but it was tired and had been hard ridden. Rolling thunder echoed along the canyon, telling of the storm to come.

The drum of hoofs on hard packed earth beat in Joel Lazenby's brain like a trip hammer. He blinked at the sudden flashes of lightning which lanced jaggedly through the blackness, his head low-hanging, drunkenly. Behind him there were some thirty sleepless hours—and more—watching doggedly at the bedside of a lawman suffering with an appendix which had threatened to burst.

Joel Lazenby had brought Sheriff Geardon back from the brink of the grave, snatching the aged badge-toter from death's hungry jaws with shining scalpel and the skill which was in Joel's slender, youthful fingers.

Weary, exhausted, Joel had staggered from the sick room—only to find the call awaiting him: Old Bill Jason lay dying of a slug near his aged heart, and other than white haired Doc Haverty, Joel was the only medico within a hundred miles. And the only surgeon. . . .

"I'll ride out and do what I can to ease his pain," Doc Haverty had sent word, "but you come like hell-fries as soon as possible. Sounds to me as if Bill'll need a first-class whittler to work on him."

So Joel had forked the bronc the Rafter J puncher had ridden in bringing the message, gigging it out into the night with his slicker streaming out behind him as he rode —half dead for lack of proper rest and food.

And already the odds were against the medico in the grim battle with death waiting at the end of the trail.

Joel half rose in the saddle, quirting the bronc with tired, absent strokes. It was the instinctive, unknowing act of a horseman half crazy for sleep. The tired cayuse was already giving its best.

Lightning blazed across the sky as they spurred out of the shale walled canyon. They pounded over Rafter J land now, yet the stout log and adobe ranch house was some two miles farther north by road.

Swinging his mount from the trail with a sharp jerk of the rein, Joel headed across the rolling acres of lush grassland. Water splashed about the hard driving hoofs of his cayuse as they raced through the winding Howling Wolf Creek which was out of its banks from rain in the hills.

Following the crow's flight, less than a half-mile of range now separated him from the home-place of the Rafter J, where death hovered.

Swabbing at his sleep ridden eyes, Joel stood upright in the stirrups to stretch his aching frame. Thunder crackled like a many barreled Gatlin gun as forked lightning stabbed through the elements.

The next instant the earth was rushing up to meet the young medico, his mount looping over in a tangle of hoofs, the eerie scream which ripped from the animal's throat drowning in a welter of blood.

As the world seemed to pinwheel upside-down, dimly to Joel Lazenby in the blaze of lightning came a distorted glimpse of a rider limned in the glare of the sudden flash, an hombre seated aback a nervously pacing bronc. Then Joel's head struck hard earth and unconsciousness swept over him.

In the darkness a man sat hurriedly whipping a length of sea-grass rope into a saddle coil. Blackness shrouded his slicker covered frame, hid his features. Short moments later the hoof-beats of his pony were

lost in the high grasses, drowned by the roar of the storm.

SAVAGELY sawing back upon the quirt-end reins, the rider sent his cayuse skidding in the mud of the trail, yanking the animal to its haunches. He tried to pierce the engulfing blackness with his gaze.

"What is it, Buck," the second rider, a Rafter J cow poke, called through the driving sheets of rain. "Spy anything?" he asked, wheeling alongside.

The rider, Buck, was kneeing his mount into the creek, dark water swirling stirrup high.

"Nate, there's something—" he began, then as lightning flamed the puncher gigged his pony through the water. Climbing the opposite bank, they slid out of leather, dropping alongside the unconscious Joel Lazenby.

"What the devil!" Nate exclaimed. "It's the Doc!"

Buck was shaking Joel violently, swabbing at his rain wetted face with a palm. Weakly the medico stirred, groaning. Exhausted, Joel fought for a grip on consciousness.

Lightning came, revealing to the two momentarily the Rafter J saddler with its neck bent beneath its body at a grotesque angle, black satchel lashed at the horn. On the vest of the rider called Buck a deputy sheriff's badge flashed back a glimmer from beneath his unbuckled slicker.

"Help me boost him up across my saddle here," the puncher was saying, "and hold him 'til I climb up behind of him. You fetch his bag. Looks like his pony took a spill and broke its neck, or something like that. This dawggone rain— Hurry it up, Buck. The Old Man might still have a slim chance!"

It was a wet and disheveled trio which dismounted at the portal of the Rafter J, grotesquely outlined in the shaft of light lancing from the opened door.

The Rafter J range boss, Cal Johns, was first to reach the portal, a question framed on his lips. Then the query died a-borning as his gaze fell upon Joel Lazenby sagging between the two men.

"What the hell?" the Rafter J segundo finally roared.

"The Doc," Nate explained. "Hurt up a little; took a spill. Buck happened to spy his yella fish in the dark."

"Get him inside," Johns ordered, his voice curt and dry. "Gimme the bag."

He wheeled as old Doc Haverty appeared from within, asking: "What's the matter, Doc?"

Doc Haverty was shaking his head, slowly and expressively. "Bill's left us," he announced simply.

Joel Lazenby struggled to come erect, staring past Cal Johns at the seamed face of the aged medico. His tongue seemed thick and heavy as he spoke.

"Dead?" he managed to gasp, hardly above a whisper. "Then I'm too late—"

Cal Johns had been turning away, about to brush past Doc Haverty, but as Joel spoke he swung to face the young surgeon. For a long moment he stared at the hatless, bedraggled form of the medico, then his voice lashed out like the popper of a whip: "Joel Lazenby—you're drunk!"

JOEL half staggered backward as if stung by the ferocity of the accusation. His brain was fogged by need of rest, sheer exhaustion, and it took him long moments to realize

the full import of the segundo's words.

"My God—" Joel began, but Johns was gripping him by the collar and speaking in a flat, clear tone.

"Lazenby," he said, "you as good as killed the best friend I ever had—the man that raised me from a pup like I was his own flesh and blood—just as shorely as if you'd have triggered that bushwhack bullet! That makes two men, Joel Lazenby, that I'm gonna kill—the devil that whipped that slug from the brush into Old Bill's back, and you!"

He faced the medico squarely, his fists clenching and unclenching. "Take yourself a cayuse and get the hell off of the Rafter J, Lazenby. Then take this advice—be dressed up like a man when I ride into Duro in the morning, for I'm killing you on sight!"

Wheeling on high boot heels, Cal Johns headed toward the bedroom where Old Bill Jason had lost his last battle.

Joel followed the segundo's back with sleep-ridden eyes. Then Doc Haverty was clutching his arm, saying: "They don't need me here any longer. I'll take Joel home."

Silently the puncher Nate splashed back out into the downpour to harness up the doctor's bays, leading the rig around to the portal. Helping Joel into the buggy, Doc Haverty tucked the lines between his fingers, clacking to the bays.

Far away, the ancient patriarch for whom Howling Wolf Canyon had been named lifted his voice to the storm-swept skies, gave wild tongue, telling of death—present and to come.

Joel sat eyeing Doc Haverty, lips dry. Through the window beyond he could see the orange ball of the rising sun. It was going to be a pleasant day, but on the older medico's face was an expression as if of pain.

"Well, I reckon this is the beginning of the end," Joel spoke up.

Doc Haverty nodded absently. "And why, that's what I want to know—why did Cal Johns have to mouth that lie?"

"I hadn't touched a drop, Doc," Joel said earnestly. "You believe that, don't you?"

"Who knows better than me what it is to spend hour after hour at a sick-bed without proper rest or nourishment? Even at that, son, you couldn't have been condemned for taking on a hooker of rye—you needed it. But they'll have your hide for it, unless you can prove Johns was telling a scurvy lie. They'll take away your license, might even frame you into the pen—why, Joel?"

It was a long moment before Joel spoke. "Gloria, I'd guess," the young surgeon said at last. "Cal Johns was escorting her about when I came back to Duro, but we had had our plans made ever since we were buttons. And when Sheriff Geardon announced my engagement to Gloria—well, Cal has hated me ever since."

"And I wouldn't put it past him to have back-shot Old Bill himself, then sent somebody to see that I didn't show up until—"

"That's it!" Doc Haverty's fist came thumping down upon the spur-scarred desktop. "Everybody knows that Old Bill left the Rafter J to Cal, and that would be killing two birds with the same stone—getting the ranch and his revenge on you at one and the same time!

"Last night, shortly after I got there, Cal rode out alone—looking for some clue as to Old Bill's killer, so he said. He was gone quite a spell; plenty long enough to have waylaid

you and forefooted your pony himself. He got in just after the storm broke and started to get a slicker and go see if you were on the way, but Buck Rawlins and one of the crew offered to go instead."

DOC HAVERTY shook his head sadly. "It's the kind of a scheme Cal Johns would think up," he continued, "but a jury would call it an old wife's tale—"

"We won't have a jury to worry about," Joel told him. "At least, Cal gave me a pretty broad hint that he was going to conduct any trial in his own way—he's shooting me on sight!"

The aged doctor's lips pressed together in a thin, hard line. His gaze bored into the eyes of the youthful medico. "Ain't laying down, are you, son?"

He jerked out a drawer of the desk with a sharp rasp, lifted out twin side-gun gear. The load loops of the belts gleamed with fresh brass cartridge heads, the plain, well used holsters filled with walnut butted single action Colts.

"When I first came to Duro it was a wild, hell-roaring camp. They shot up the sheriff and his two deputies and went out for a night of blood and powder smoke.

"I strapped on these two guns and went out to get those wounded lawmen. I got' em, too! And after I'd patched 'em up, I took care of such as had objected with my move —such as weren't jobs for the undertaker!"

Doc Haverty paused, breathing hard.

"Joel Lazenby, you've got to fight Cal Johns in the way he savvies. While you slept, I got out these old Colts and cleaned 'em up; there they are. You stayed away from Duro a long time getting your education, but it's the same—a dog-eat-dog, kill-or-be-killed town.

"Back east you took an oath to save men's lives, and before I'll see you lose your own to satisfy the greed of a black hearted sheep-killing dog like Cal Johns, I'll get the bulge on him myself and—"

Joel stood. He spread his fingers fanwise before him.

"Doc, my dad always wanted me to be a respected citizen—you know that. But Wolf Lazenby didn't neglect my education when it came to gunnery." Joel buckled the old gun rigs criss-cross about his middle. "You said years ago that I had surgeon's fingers, Doc, made to give life—but my dad knew they were the fingers of a born gunfighter like himself, and he trained them for gunwork he prayed they'd never be called on to do."

"I know." The aged doctor smiled grimly. "Cal Johns is forcing your hand, though. He'll be here full of white likker and bragging about the notch he's going to whittle for a Colt-dummy. If you dad was living, he couldn't blame you for taking up the gun in self-defense. Just be careful!"

GLORIA GEARDON was waiting at Joel's office, a strange look mirrored in her dark eyes.

"Joel—is it—it's not true, is it, Joel?" she was speaking hastily. "They're saying—"

His eyes met her worried gaze squarely. "Do you believe it, Gloria?"

"Oh, Joel!" She threw herself into his arms. "I had to hear it from you. I couldn't ever doubt you, Joel." A hint of a smile broke through her pained expression.

Joel let his arms fall away. "Bet-

ter get back to your dad," he told her.

"Yes, I'd better. He's alone with Wally. So long, Joel." She touched soft lips to his, was gone.

For a long time Joel sat staring straight ahead, toward his diploma on the wall—the parchment which Doc Haverty and the gunman Wolf Lazenby had aided him to earn. Years of struggle and sacrifice were wrapped up in that paper—all to be lost to death or shame.

There was a rattle of hoofs on the street outside and Joel shifted his gaze to see the Rafter J crew passing, led by Cal Johns. They reined in their mounts at the livery corral, as if expecting to be in town for a spell.

Joel came erect slowly, hitching the double gun gear to a more comfortable position. On the opposite side of the street he saw Cal Johns and the deputy sheriff, Buck Rawlins, engaged in conversation. Johns was speaking, the lawman nodding several times affirmatively as he listened.

Donning his hat, Joel stepped outside, a trace of anger in his movements as he shoved out into the sunlight.

The Rafter J men were posted near the corral, waiting, watching. Cal Johns came across the street, slanting toward Joel's office. Buck Rawlins followed, a few paces behind the Rafter J range boss and several feet to one side.

Joel waited. The Rafter J segundo came to a standstill scarcely a half dozen paces away. Momentarily he posed with legs braced wide apart, stiffly, thumbs hooked over his belt. His forehead was twisted into a deep-furrowed frown.

"I'm not running, Cal," Joel told him, speaking low, but clearly. "Make your play, or get out of my sight and stay out!"

Johns sunk into a half crouch. "Who the hell you think you're ordering around?" He spat the words. His voice suddenly lifted, carrying clearly to the men at the livery: "Keep your paws away from them guns, Lazenby!"

Even as he shouted, Johns' hands were stabbing for low hung holsters.

Joel's palms slapped the walnut stocks, cool beneath his slender fingers as they curled about the plow handled butts, flicking the old Colts free of leather with uplifted thumbs to ear back spike hammers against the down-chop of leveling barrels.

THERE was no cocking click as those long barrels came in line. Joel loosed his thumbs, letting both hammers drop with the far-rolling thunder of a double explosion.

Acrid smoke billowed out to be whipped away by the breeze. The foreman was hurled backward by the heavy slugs, missing the edge of the boardwalk. The gun he had drawn roared as Johns' body thudded into the dust of the street, the wild slug digging a furrow as it plowed harmlessly along the roadway.

Buck Rawlins' eyes were wide, his mouth open. His gun came out as he sprang over the body of the segundo.

"You murdered him," the deputy was shouting.

Joel pivoted, blocking Rawlins' gun hand with one forearm and bringing the long barrel of his free gun across the man's eyes. The deputy's gun gave tongue, sending a wild bullet plowing into the wall beyond Joel. Again the medico lifted the long barrel of the Colt, slamming Rawlins back with a hard blow to the temple.

The Rafter J punchers were ring-

ing about Joel now, jarring to a halt as they spied the unwavering muzzles of Doc Haverty's old .45s, their hammers retained by no cocking notches.

Joel spoke quickly, "Don't a mother's son of you make an awkward move. I'm passing, and the first one who tries to stop me will join those two there in the dirt!"

For a moment they eyed him in silence, then one of the punchers spoke up: "Go ahead, Doc. You got the ups on us, now, but remember that you ain't outa the woods yet."

Joel turned his back on them, sheathing his guns. They let him go, watching his back as he entered the livery.

Gloria met him as he led his black gelding from the stable. He'd expected her—bad news traveled fast in Duro.

Her hand pressed Joel's, leaving in his palm a round, hard object. Joel's fingers closed over it and there was a question in his voice: "Good-bye?"

Gloria nodded slowly. "I might have excused your protecting yourself from Cal Johns, even though they say you used an underhand trick to do so, but Buck Rawlins has been taken up to Doc Haverty's office with a fractured skull! That's too much, Joel.

"Buck was a lawman—the same breed as my father and my brother Wally. They're saying that you've tasted your first blood, and now the killer will come out in you—the wolf streak—and it won't stop there! Oh, Joel—"

She tore herself away from him, running up the street with hot tears brimming her eyes. Without glancing at the ring, Joel pocketed it and moved on.

Hardly conscious of his movements, Joel got his kit from his office and silently swung aboard the black gelding, heading south out of town. He had intended returning the aged doctor's guns, then to ride out into the hills where he could be alone to think. But now—there was nothing more for him in Duro, or anywhere. The kit, battered in last night's fall, he took along absently, instinctively.

It was some twenty odd miles to the south that Joel remembered Doc Haverty's old Colts, but it was too late now to return to Duro-town.

NIGHT had fallen by the time Joel Lazenby rode into the cow-town of Downing's Flats at the southern end of the county.

Joel had visited Downing's Flats before, as a child and on professional calls, but to the liveryman bedding down the gelding, the surly Joel Lazenby seemed a stranger.

Having eaten, a half hour later Joel was heading up the dark main stem of the Flats, hotelward, when hurried footfalls rang along the hard packed earth behind him and the pressure of a hard, cold gun muzzle boring into his spine stopped him in his tracks.

A fear-trembled voice, as yet unrasped by age, lashed out at the medico: "Sky your paws, Joel! Get 'em up, now—that's it, way up high!"

There was insistence in the voice, coupled with just a tiny ring of fear—cause enough for Joel to stretch his arms the full length.

"Now turn around slow and peel off them guns," he was next ordered.

Joel turned slowly, his gaze fastening upon the face of the youth before him. Wally Geardon's fist clutched a big hip-gun, the deputy's badge on his shirt front casting back a stray glimmer of light. Nervous, Joel was thinking, and a mighty itchy

trigger finger—a dangerous combination.

"Watch your hands, now!" the youthful badge-toter warned.

The darkness shrouded Joel's queer crooked smile. "My gun rigs are buckled in the back, Wally," he informed the boy, "and I'll have to—"

Wally took a step forward, then changed his mind and checked his move, backing still another pace. "Reach for them buckles easy, then," he finally commanded. "I don't want to kill you if I can help, Joel—"

Anger was suddenly flaring hotly within Joel Lazenby. Only hours ago he had brought Sheriff Geardon back from certain death, a task which he alone might have accomplished, considering time and distance. And now—

Joel's slender fingers fumbled at the gun-belt buckles. The left rig fell to the ground. He loosened the second clasp, then his right hand was snapping forward to catch the falling Colt butt. He leveled the long barrel as the holster dropped free, flinching as Wally's gun roared harmlessly and rocking hammer with a savage flick of his thumb.

Grunting, Wally Geardon staggered backward, half turned as he fell face upward. His sixgun jarred from his grip, blasting a second wild slug.

With the thunder of gun-sound the town noises faded. Through the sudden hush cut the frightened scream of a girl, lost in the beat of hard-driving hoofs. Gloria Geardon slewed her mount to a halt near the two, free hand pressed to her mouth as she leapt from the saddle, fear mirrored in her eyes.

Across the way, the door of a poolroom had been flung wide and the light streaming through limned her clearly in its glare.

"Don't!" Gloria shouted. "Joel, don't—don't kill him! Please—" She was breathing hard from her ride.

The light playing over them caught a strange, savage gleam mirrored in Joel Lazenby's eyes, a wolfish snarl twisting his lips. He had tasted blood....

"Joel!" Gloria shrank back, as if she could read in his expression the hot anger surging through his veins. "Is he—is he dead?"

"No!" the medico lashed at her. "He's not dead, now; but he damn' soon will be, the ungrateful—"

He half turned to pick up his fallen gun-gear and move on.

HAD she screamed, had she pleaded and protested, in that instant the wolf strain would have completely enveloped Joel Lazenby, damning him to forever ride the owl-hoot trails—the murderer of a lawman!

But Gloria's voice was low and calm, though a little frightened: "Joel, is this you—kicking a foeman after he's down?"

The soft words were like a slap in the face. Joel straightened to his full height, looking down at the tear-streaked face upturned to his.

"Joel," she continued hastily, "I'm a lawman's daughter and Wally's a lawman's son. We grew up to respect the dignity of the law—a law badge to us always meant something fine, something to cherish—

"After you'd gone, Joel, Buck Rawlins regained consciousness and, thinking he was dying, confessed to Doc Haverty that Cal Johns had shot down old Bill Jason from the brush and had later tripped your pony to delay you when there might have been a slim chance of saving Old Bill. Buck was to have received a large cut after the Rafter J legacy had been

settled for his part in 'finding' you at the right time last night and steering suspicions away from Cal. It was anger at seeing that money slip away from him after you had—had shot Cal that led him to attack you."

Joel was kneeling at Wally Geardon's side. Someone had brought a lantern and a small group of curious ringed about.

"Meanwhile," Gloria continued, "Wally had slipped away and I was sure he was going after you. Buck wasn't hurt so badly, so Doc Haverty agreed to stay with dad—"

Joel looked up from his examination of the still form of the young deputy. "My slug bored his abdomen," he told Gloria. "He's still bleeding—might have a chance."

He retrieved the doctor's gun-gear and headed for the livery. Absently Joel draped the gun belts across his saddle and unlashed his kit.

Men of the gathered crowd had carried the boy into the poolroom at Gloria's direction and placed him on a table. An hombre wearing the star of a town constable was swabbing away blood with a clean towel. Someone had started a fire in the baseburner centering the establishment and on it a kettle of water was steaming.

"We got hot water and towels from the barber-shop," the constable told Joel. "Some of the boys has gone up to the hotel to try and get some sheets for bandages. Anything else we can do, doctor?"

Wally stirred slightly, moaned low. Once more Joel Lazenby was the surgeon. The emanation of chloroform hung in the air of the poolroom.

Jeol began to cut away the blood soaked clothing. "Get me a basin and let me wash up," he ordered the lawman. "He's pretty far gone—but all I ask is God's aid and a fifty-fifty break."

From the black satchel he drew forth sutures and needles in their germ-proof cases—and his trusted scalpels, gleaming in the smoky light, whetted and honed to a hair's edge.

He sterilized the instruments in boiling water; then a scalpel was flashing in the lamplight as it was drawn across the aperture made by the slug, slitting through layers of tissue. The constable of Downing's Flats was swabbing away blood, gritting his teeth the while as if in pain.

Then even the hard-cases among the group of spectators were holding their breath as through the incision Joel drew the stomach of Wally Geardon!

The bullet had struck the boy's belt buckle, glancing and passing through his abdomen to lodge in the far wall of the stomach. The hole in the stomach was an ugly looking wound, the spent slug having torn rather than pierced its way through the tissue.

EXPRESSIONLESSLY the medico bathed the wounded parts, both in hot water and with an antiseptic. His quick fingers carefully drew sutures through the cleansed and dressed aperture in the wall of the stomach, sewed the abdominal incision with stitches of silk worm gut. Over the external cut Joel splashed raw alcohol, swabbing it dry with towels and binding the wound with strips from the hotel sheet.

"Get some blankets and quilts and wrap him up well. Better get him to bed right away." Joel jotted down a list of instructions in a pocket note book as he spoke: "Feed him beef juice, chicken broth and such. A

little buttered toast won't hurt him, if it's not hard, and coffee. If his digestive organs don't want to function properly, give him small doses of calomel."

He passed the slip to Gloria, put his palm to the boy's forehead and felt the pulse.

"Feverish," he announced. "I'd expect that in a healthy young person."

Grim faced, Joel packed his kit. Men lining the walls of the pool hall stepped forward to lend any possible assistance.

Tender hands lifted the young deputy, swaddling him in blankets.

Joel turned to the constable. "Well—"

The lawman glanced past him at Gloria, then shook his head. "You ain't wanted for nothing, doctor," he said.

Several men bore Wally up to the hotel. Joel followed them outside, breathed deeply of the night air. He was there on the step of the poolroom when Gloria returned from the hotel, walking straight to him and probing his shirt pocket. She found the ring and held it out to him.

"Will you, Joel?" she asked. "It's so—so futile to say that I'm sorry—"

The medico was smiling softly as he slipped the ring upon her finger. His hand pressed hers, drew away, leaving in her palm a misshapen forty-five calibre slug.

Her voice was low. "I've got to go stay with Wally," she suggested.

"Yes—you'd better. We'll see if we can't move him tomorrow—take him home." Joel drew her to him, pressed his lips to hers. He stood there peering after her, long after she was lost in the darkness.

Slowly Joel Lazenby turned his steps toward the livery to recover the Colts of the old medico—guns whose task had ended.

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Monroe shot again and the lanky killer went down.

THE LONG TRAIL BACK

Sometimes jail does things to a man. Monroe came back from his stretch without bitterness against his ex-partner who'd run out on him, gone straight, and turned lawman. Came back to turn his killer's guns on the outlaws who were waiting to drygulch Mark Harvey!

MONROE stabled his tired horse in Leedy's livery-barn and then, tall and dusty from his long ride, his .45s weighting his hips, he went down Leedy's plank sidewalk, a tough stranger in a tough cowtown. He met Jean Harvey as she came from the Mercantile store, her arms filled with bundles.

Monroe said, "Hello, Jean."

She stared. "Monroe! What are you doing in Leedy?"

"I came to kill York Vail," he said simply.

She drew back slightly. And Monroe knew, then, a touch of bitterness. Outwardly, though, his calm did not change. He studied her momentarily.

Six years had changed her. She had been

by LEE FLOREN

a girl, then; now she was a woman. And now, too, she was prettier than ever. Monroe felt his blood quicken.

"But why do you aim to kill York Vail?" she asked. "What has he done to you? You have never seen him? And how did you hear about him? It's a long way from Montana to Yuma—"

"To Yuma penitentiary," he finished.

Her face, then, showed conflicting emotions. She was surprised at his presence here, and she tried to hide her surprise. She was a true daughter of Big Jim Vincent and, like Big Jim, she was made of stern metal. And her voice, when she spoke again, sounded level.

"How did you hear, Monroe?"

Monroe said softly, "They call it the prison grapevine, Jean. The word passes from cell to cell, from mouth to mouth. Where it comes from only God knows." He added in that same low tone. "But I'm here, an' that's all that counts. . . ."

"How did you get out? Pardon?"

He smiled. "These," he said, and tapped his pouched guns.

That told her. She knew those guns. Suddenly, she changed her tactics. "Did you come to kill York Vail. . . .or to kill Mark Harvey?"

That hurt. "Then you don't believe me?" Monroe asked.

"No," she said.

Monroe held that, turning it over in his mind, and he knew a tinge of discouragement. He brushed this aside. She had seen but one side of him. The outlaw side. An eye for an eye. . . .a tooth for a tooth. The outlaw code. And now, she based her logic upon this.

"I'm sorry, Jean."

"What else can I think?" she demanded.

"There are some things a man can never explain," Monroe said. "Things only he can understand. Prison bars change a man's life, Jean. Change his thoughts, his body, his desires."

"But you hate Mark Harvey."

Momentarily, then, Monroe was silent. He had expected this. This thought had been his only companion on his long ride north, had been his through long hours in the saddle, had been his companion through Colorado, through Wyoming. And now, it confronted him. He changed the subject.

"See those men standin' in front of the Silver Dollar, Jean?"

She turned, and looked. Four men stood there watching them. Four hardcased gunmen. Men whose stern and relentless faces were marked by the gun. Marked by the same stamp of Cain that showed all too clearly on Monroe's own hawknosed face. The .45 brand.

"Yes," she said.

"Those men tried to murder your husband, Sheriff Mark Harvey," he said. "They failed. But they'll try again. That's why I'm here, Jean. To keep them from killin' Mark."

Her eyes, Monroe noticed, were on York Vail, standing with those four killers. This Vail was a stocky man, bull-necked and husky and hard, every inch the killer. Monroe had met Vail's kind before. Men like Vail lived by their guns; died under roaring lead. They had to die under bullets. They had no other way to die. . . .

Jean said, "Monroe, get out of Leedy."

He smiled, "No, Jean."

"Mark can take care of himself," she said.

"Maybe he can," he said, "an' maybe he can't. But how about you, Jean? You and Mark have two children. An' if these cutthroats killed Mark. . . ."

"Do you still love me, Monroe?"

"I do," he said.

She colored slightly. "Then if you do, please ride on. This town has seen its share of blood and guns. For my sake, leave this town." Her voice was pleading.

"And leave Mark to die alone?"

"He's sheriff here," she said. "If he is killed, it will be in line of his duty. He has to take that chance, Monroe."

Monroe said patiently, "These Vail men are murderers, Jean. They shot Mark once—through the back in an alley. The next time, they won't miss."

"Mark'll take that chance. . . ."

"He won't, though," Monroe maintained. "I won't let him."

She said, "This doesn't make sense. Mark deserted you and my father, Big Jim, that day in Feather Tail. Deserted you, and left you alone facing those guns, and dad got killed. . . ."

"We were outlaws," Monroe said slowly. "We had to face those guns, Jean."

"But Mark— He left you two behind—"

"Don't talk about that," Monroe said.

She bit her lip. She was up against a stone wall; her eyes told him that. She knew, suddenly, that further talk was useless.

"Please, leave Leedy," she begged.

He said stubbornly, "No."

She turned then, and left.

STANDING there, smiling tightly, Monroe watched her leave. Outwardly, he showed nothing. Inside, though, was something else. Not indecision, not disappointment—rather, a sort of irony. His thoughts went back six years.

A weather-beaten, sun-scorched Arizona cowtown. And three riders—Big Jim Vincent, young Mark Harvey, and himself—holding up this town's bank.

Young Harvey had stood outside, holding the getaway broncs. Monroe and Big Jim, guns out, had walked into the bank. Walked into a waiting gun-trap.

Colts had snarled. Monroe and Big Jim, .45s talking, had fought their way outside in time to see Mark Harvey riding madly out of town—and the getaway horses stampeding away with dragging reins. . . .

There was nothing left to do but fight it out. Two men against a town. Two outlaws deserted by a fellow longrider when they needed him the most. Now a bullet caught Big Jim Vincent.

That bullet dumped Big Jim dead at Monroe's feet. Lead slapped Monroe's shoulder, knocked him to one knee. Kneeling there, fighting desperately, he carried on. And then, blackness.

Then, Yuma penitentiary.

Six years behind bars. Heat that killed. Nights, frosty and damp, with chill clinging to stone walls. A lunger coughing his life away. A heavy sledge and cold beans. And word seeping through now and then.

Mark Harvey had married Jean Vincent. Now Mark was in Montana, a lawman. And Monroe, lying on his filthy bunk, thinking this over. Seeing those faces, out there in the dark.

Slowly, the alchemy of prison had permeated him. And he saw, then, how wrong his life had been. This had grown on him, built inside him, became part of him. He thought of Mark Harvey, and of Jean, and of their family. And the old hate had slowly died. Hate, he knew then, was useless. It was a festering sore, eating into a man's life. Either you killed it; or it killed you. Then, too, had come word of Mark Harvey's ambushing. . . .

So Monroe had broken jail, ridden north.

Now he turned toward the Steerhead Cafe, these thoughts crowding him. Now, too, York Vail left his gunmen in front of the Silver Dollar saloon and crossed the rutted street toward him.

Vail said, "Wait a minute, stranger."

Monroe stopped, turned. "What's on your mind?"

Vail halted beside him. "I'm York Vail," he said. "I run this town. I own the Silver Dollar, the Circle A spread, the Bar—"

"An' the Rafter X, too," Monroe said easily. "Don't forget that outfit, Vail."

Vail's eyes tightened. "So you've heard about me, huh?"

"Nothin' good, though," Monroe said.

Vail overlooked that and asked, "What's your name?"

"Monroe."

"Your first name?"

Monroe said, "Jus' Monroe," and continued with, "Ain't that enough?"

Vail turned this over slowly in his slow brain, feeling the temper of Monroe's low words, and finding a hardness there he didn't like. Anger touched him, but he held it.

He said, "What are you doin' in Leedy?"

"I came to kill a man," Monroe said.

"Kill who?"

Monroe said, bluntly, "You!"

Surprise ran across Vail's eyes. The blunt arrogance of Monroe's words hit deeply. He had never met a man like this before. He tried another tactic.

"What've you—a stranger—got ag'n me, Monroe?"

"You, or one of your cheap killers, ambushed an' damned near killed Mark Harvey."

Vail breathed deeply. Now the puzzle was complete; he put the pieces together. He understood now.

"You a frien' of Harvey's?"

"I am."

Now both were momentarily silent. Vail's eyes were hot on Monroe. Monroe was smiling a little. He gauged the depth of this killer, and found him shallow. But, never for a moment, did he underestimate Vail. This man was tough. Hard. Domineering. When he went after something, he got it. He had tried to kill Mark Harvey. He had bungled. But he'd try again. . . .and this time he'd succeed. Monroe knew that.

"A frien' of Mark Harvey's is an enemy of mine, Monroe."

Monroe said patiently, "That's why I have to kill you, Vail." He smiled and added, "But there's a way out. . . .for you."

"An' that?"

"Leave town."

Vail laughed softly. "Me leave Leedy!" he scoffed. "Why, you tinhorn gun-slammer, I'll—"

Vail flung a hard right fist at Monroe's jaw.

But he didn't catch Monroe off-guard. Monroe ducked, but not low enough. Moving in, he caught the wild blow on his shoulder, shrugged it off. Vail, off-balance now, lurched ahead—lurched into a smashing left fist.

It was a hard blow to the jaw. Monroe saw Vail's eyes go dazed, heard him grunt loudly. Then Vail rocked in close, fighting hard.

Monroe gave ground; he had to. Knuckles beat his face, his shoulders. He tasted salty blood on his tongue. Vail's hoarse breathing rattled in his ears. He hit Vail again.

The blow turned Vail slightly. There on that dusty street, they fought savagely. No human flesh could stand that battering. One had to go down. Now Vail threw a wild right and Monroe moved in pantherishly, letting the blow curve wide and land on his back, a mauling gesture that had already lost its power. He jockeyed Vail around and saw his opening and hit him three times—two lefts and a right—flatly on the jaw.

IT WAS like hitting solid rock. But Monroe saw Vail's eyes show pain, saw Vail's heavy body slump slightly. And Monroe brought in his right fist again

Vail staggered backwards. Monroe hit again, and connected solidly. Vail was out on his feet. Momentum carried him backwards, though, and then his spurs caught on the edge of the sidewalk, and he went down, there in the dust. He rolled halfway over and lay on his side, knocked unconscious.

Now Monroe spat blood and moved forward, fully aware that Vail's gunmen already stood in a circle around their beaten gunboss, that curious townspeople stood grouped in front of stores and business houses, watching him.

Monroe looked at the gunmen and asked, "Well?"

A stocky hombre, black and swarthy, came up to Monroe and said, "York Vail is my frien', stranger."

"An' you're takin' up his fight?"

"Yo're damned right—"

He didn't finish. Monroe's fist saw to that. The gunster went back against a building. Standing there, mouthing bloody curses, he went for his cutter.

He was fast. He got in one shot. But Monroe's bullet, coming the moment before, turned his aim and sent his lead harmlessly plowing dust ten feet away. The gun-slammer dropped his smoking .45 and grabbed his broken shoulder, blood already coloring his grimy fingers.

"Don't kill me, mister?" he begged hoarsely.

"Don't pick up your gun!" Monroe warned.

The man snarled, "I'm not that loco!"

Now York Vail was coming to. A lanky gunman, sallow-faced and angry, moved forward, got his arm around Vail, and pulled his boss bodily to his feet. The lanky man said, "I'm killin' you fer this, fella!"

"I'll be ready," Monroe promised.

Vail shook his bullish head, spat and said nothing. He was groggy and dazed; his eyes unclear. Silence fell, and Monroe probed it. But he found no menace. There would be, he knew, a time and a place for these guns to talk. . . .but that time and place was not here.

So he said, "Get him off the street, men!"

The wounded man said, "My gun—?"

"You'll get it back," Monroe assured.

They turned then and went across the street to the Silver Dollar, Vail and the lanky man in the lead, with the wounded man and the other gunster following. Monroe watched them until the batwing doors closed on them. Then he jacked the fired shell from his .45, jammed a new cartridge into the cylinder. He picked up the stocky man's gun and tossed it to a townsman who fumbled it, then picked it up.

"What'll I do with it?" the man asked nervously.

Monroe smiled. "Give it to him when you see him," he said.

The townsman said, "But he'll turn it against you, stranger."

"Maybe so," Monroe said, "maybe so. . . ."

He turned and went again toward the Steerhead, then changed his mind and entered the hardware store. "A box of .45 shells," he told the man.

Monroe broke the box, stuffed the shells into his belt loops. The man, a middle-aged, heavy bodied fellow, watched him. "Your name Monroe?" he asked.

"It is."

"I'm Mike Tottness," the man said. "Glad

to meet you, Monroe." He shook hands, his grip hard and steady, and Monroe read him for what he was—a strong man who loved peace but who would not evade a fight to maintain that peace. "We need a man like you in Leedy, Monroe."

"Because of Vail?" Monroe asked.

"That's it," Tottness said.

Monroe spoke softly. "The townsmen 'scared of him an' his killers?"

Tottness' voice lowered. "Not exactly afraid, Monroe. But they are hesitating, an' slow, an' don't know just what to do. But some of us is about ready to take the law into our own hands. Last night we held a meetin' an' organized a vigilance committee. Three weeks ago, Mark Harvey got ambushed. We all think a heap of Mark an' his family. That wife of his'n is one in a million. Talks been sweepin' over this town since you arrived. An' I take it you know Mark?"

"I do," Monroe assured.

"You know Jean, too."

Monroe said, "A wonderful woman."

Tottness drummed his fingers on the show-case. Something heavy weighted his mind, Monroe knew, so Monroe waited calmly, and then Tottness finally voiced his question.

"I don't know what this is all about, Monroe. You're a stranger here. But any enemy of Vail's is a frien' of mine. An' of Leedy's, too. You're a man who knows guns. An' us townsmen need a man like you to lead us. You say you aim to kill York Vail. That's all right with us. But the point is this: it's our job, too."

"You crave to help me?" Monroe asked.

"That's it."

"Thanks," Monroe said. "But I'll manage alone."

Tottness studied his fingers. "But it's still our job," he repeated stubbornly.

"I'll bargain," Monroe said. "Let me have first whack at Vail. If I bungle, you men kin take over." He added softly, "Did you see my bronc when I rode into Leedy?"

"He was grimed with sweat an' dust," Tottness said. "I noticed his front shoes. They were as thin as dimes. He's come a long ways. . ."

"A long, long ways," Monroe added.

Tottness said then, "Okay, Monroe. You kill Vail, then we'll handle his gundogs. Good luck, fella."

Monroe grinned boyishly. "I'll need it," he said simply.

"Vail won't let this ride long," Tottness warned. "He can't afford to. He'll move against you pronto."

"Suits me," Monroe grunted.

MONROE went inside. For a full minute he stood on the sidewalk, filling his lungs with the clean prairie air, trying not to think of Yuma pen and that lunger's dying cough, building his thoughts and pointing them toward the future. But he put this aside, and entered the Steerhead Cafe and took a stool at the counter.

"Your order?" the waitress asked.

He ordered and was eating when a small boy entered and tugged his sleeve. "I wanta talk to you," the kid said.

Monroe smiled, "Go ahead, sonny."

"I'm Bill," the tike said.

"Bill who?"

"Bill Harvey."

Monroe studied him suddenly. So this was Jean's boy! He looked like Jean, too, and then, also, he resembled Mark Harvey. "What's up, Bill?" he asked.

"Dad wants to see you. Wants you to come down to the house."

Monroe thought of seeing Jean and Mark Harvey, there in their home, and for once he deliberately avoided an unpleasant meeting—it would only hurt him, he knew. So he said, "Tell your dad I'll meet him in his office. He can walk on crutches, can't he?"

"Sure," Bill assured. "He can get along purty good, too. I'll tell him." He turned to leave and Monroe said, "You're forgettin' somethin', feller." He dug into his Levis and came out with a silver dollar.

Bill's eyes widened. "What's that for?"

"For bringin' me this message."

"I can't take it," Bill said hastily. "Mom says it ain't right to get money for nothin'. I was goin' to the store anyway."

"Better take it," Monroe said.

"Nah, can't." Bill looked at the waitress. "What'd you say, Molly?"

"You like licorice sticks," the girl said. "That dollar'll buy lots of them, Bill."

"Yeah," Bill admitted slowly. His face lightened suddenly. "You take the dollar, Molly. Buy me some candy with it. Then when I want some, I'll borrow it off of you. We'll get aroun' her that way."

"A whole dollar's worth?"

"The whole works," the kid said. Then to Monroe, "Thanks, mister."

"No debt," Monroe assured.

After the boy had left Monroe said to

the waitress, "How far north to the Canadian border?"

"About 40 miles."

"An' from the border to Wood Mountain?"

"Another hundred and fifty miles, I guess."

Monroe left the dollar with her, paid his bill, and went outside knowing that the girl was watching him, knowing that she was thinking of Canada's Wood Mountain country and that he was going there—riding to this lonely lawless outpost, the refuge of wanted men, of hard-bitten outlaws. When he was opposite the doctor's office the medico and one of the Vail gunmen, a lanky, cadaverous man, came out of that building and the gunman said, "Hey, Monroe, come here!"

Monroe halted. "What's on your mind?"

The gun-slammer said to the doctor, "Vail an' the others are waitin' for you in the Silver Dollar. Make tracks."

The medico hustled his fat bulk up the street. The gunman looked at Monroe. "Follow me, I wanna talk to you."

Monroe followed the man between two buildings. They halted there, hidden, and the gunman said, "What's goin' on in this burg, Monroe?"

"What'd you mean?"

"The talk of Tottness organizin' a vigilante committee is sweepin' this town. An' there must be some truth to it. I've got eyes. The townsmen are gatherin' in Tottness' store. They're packin' guns. Me, I don't like the looks uh this."

"Why not?"

"Them Vigilantes are tough. I seen what they did to the Plummer gang in Alder Gulch. They hung Wishbone Petty an' One Eye Thompson plenty high. I don't want none of 'em, believe you me!"

"Worried about keepin' your neck on you, huh?"

The hombre grinned sickly. "That's it," he admitted.

"If I did know," Monroe said, "why should I tell you?"

"I'll bargain with you," the gunslammer said.

"How?"

"I know all about York Vail's plans. He aims to kill you, Monroe."

"I know that," Monroe said.

"But you don't know when he aims to move ag'in you," the gunman emphasized.

Monroe nodded slowly. This man was right. "Okay, spill it, feller."

The man talked fast. "The doc's patchin' up Hutchins, the killer you plugged. He's patchin' up Vail from that beatin' you handed him. Then Vail an' Hutchins an' Slim's comin' out with their guns. An' they're shootin' you on sight. Now what about this vigilante deal?"

Monroe told him. The gunster said, "I'm dustin' outa this burg." He said no more. He turned and went to the livery-barn and, a minute or so later, Monroe saw him ride out, his bronc hitting a high lope toward the north. Monroe grinned and crossed the street and entered the sheriff's office.

A small office. Clean, though. Monroe took the swivel chair and sat looking at Jean's picture, there on the roll-top desk. He was sitting like this, silent with his thoughts, when he heard the crutches on the sidewalk outside. This sound grew louder and then the door opened and Mark Harvey entered.

Neither man spoke for some time. Mark Harvey leaned on his crutches and looked at Monroe, his face showing his emotions. And Monroe, watching Harvey, saw that the man had lost his boyishness—he was settled now and solid with manhood. And his hair, once very black, was streaked with gray and his face showed the hardness of these six years, too. Then Mark Harvey spoke.

He said, "Hello, Monroe."

"Hello, Mark. What's botherin' you?"

"A lot of things," Mark Harvey admitted slowly. "Jean tol' me about meetin' you, how you'd busted jail. But what are you doin' in Leedy?"

"I'm killin' York Vail."

"Why?"

"So he won't kill you!"

MARK HARVEY thought that over, probing it, and then he said, "Why such an interest in my welfare, Monroe?"

"Let's not go into that," Monroe said.

"I deserted you that day in Feather Tail," Mark Harvey said. "I left you an' Big Jim there to die in front of those guns. Then why—?"

"Feather Tail was spiked with guns," Monroe said. "You had to ride out to save your own hide. There was no percentage in stayin'. You didn't have a chance. You did right by leaving, Mark."

"Right, hell! I was a coward—a fool kid coward! An' you know it, Monroe!"

"You were no coward," Monroe maintained. "If you'd been a coward, you'd never be sheriff of this county today. A coward doesn't fight, Harvey. An' you've had a hard fight to establish yourself here." He got to his feet. His voice was low. "But forget that part of it. No use thinkin' of that—it's passed. I've always thought a heap of you—"

Mark Harvey interrupted. "But that ain't enough, Monroe!" His voice lowered. "Is it because of Jean?"

"No."

"Then why—?"

Monroe saw, then, the futility of further words. For a moment, he felt like trying to tell Mark Harvey what was inside him—tell him of those prison years, of the dying of useless hate, how the solitude had broadened him and built him. But what was the use? For you cannot tell that. You can't find the words. For it's part of you, part of your life—and no words can explain it. Accordingly he put this aside and said, "Jus' accept my help, Mark, an' let it go at that. . ."

"I can't let you fight my battles," Mark Harvey stated.

Monroe tried another tactic. "Think of Jean—an' your kids. If you'd go down before Vail's guns—"

"I've thought of that!"

"I see," Monroe muttered, "I see." He moved forward, put one hand on Harvey's shoulder. "Mark," he said softly, "lissen to me. . ."

He never finished his sentence. Suddenly, with his one hand, he jerked Mark Harvey forward, throwing the man off-balance and then, striking hard, he sent his other fist flatly on Harvey's square jaw. Harvey never even had time to cry out. He slumped suddenly, unconscious on his feet, and Monroe grabbed him before he could fall. Standing there, holding the unconscious Harvey, he grinned boyishly.

The jail keys were on the desk and Monroe took these. Then, toting Harvey over one shoulder, he went through the door leading to the jail, a long log building connected to the sheriff's office. Here he unlocked a cell and entered. He laid Harvey on a bunk, braced his crutches beside the bed, and then went outside, locking the cell behind him.

For a moment, then, he stood looking through the bars at Harvey inside. Then, turning, he went back to the sheriff's office. His movements were faster, now. Working swiftly, he checked and hefted his guns and then, satisfied, he returned them to their holsters.

He went to the window and looked out. Dusk lay like a dark silken shroud over Leedy's main street, and a group of armed townsmen stood in front of Tottness' hardware store. Now, too, York Vail and his two killers left the Silver Dollar.

The gunslammers moved down the sidewalk, heading for the sheriff's office. They walked slowly and they spread out as they advanced, their bootheels sounding loudly on the plank walk.

Monroe knew, suddenly, that gunsmoke was ahead. These killers had seen him enter the sheriff's office, now they came after him. And Monroe's blood quickened.

He went to the roll-top desk. He took Jean's picture and, working swiftly, he carefully put it under his shirt, feeling it against his bare skin. Then, his hands resting on his holstered .45's, he stepped outside and waited there, leaning tense and ready against the sheriff's office.

Vail and his killers saw him, but they didn't stop. They came on, hulking and big in the gathering darkness, and then they halted some forty feet away. Now Tottness' harsh voice cut the silence.

"Need any help, Monroe?"

Monroe never took his gaze from the killers. "No," he said. The words were low, yet they carried to Tottness. There was a short silence and then Tottness replied with, "Okay, Monroe. But we take up where you leave off!"

"Suits me," Monroe said.

"Me, too!" Vail said. He balanced himself on his heavy legs and his guns leaped from holsters.

Vail was fast—but not as fast as his swarthy killer. That killer was lightning—almost as fast as Monroe. For Monroe's first bullet, accurately placed, killed the swarthy gundog just as the Vail killer fired.

The killer's lead sang wildly into space. He screamed, tried to turn, but his knees gave out, and he went down dead.

A bullet tugged at Monroe's shirt. Monroe shot again. The lanky killer, on Vail's right, went down like he'd been slugged. Then Vail's cutters were running red.

BULLETS kicked splinters from the building beside Monroe. Standing there, his face grim, Monroe fired six times —and each bullet found Vail.

Vail said, "Ugh!" and dropped his smoking guns. He stumbled forwards two paces, dead in his boots, and then his knees buckled and he hit the dust. And it was over.

Emotionless, Monroe moved forward, loading his hot guns. He crossed the street and stopped in front of Tottness.

"You hurt?" the hardware man asked.

"No," Monroe said. He turned to leave, and Tottness grabbed his shoulder. "Where you goin', Monroe?"

Monroe said, "They tell me Vail has gunmen on his ranches. Get a posse an' ride that way!"

"That's right!" Tottness snapped. He turned on the townsmen. "Hit saddles, hombres, an' ride!"

They rode out fast, dust hanging behind them, and Monroe went to the livery-barn, a strange inner feeling running through him. There, he rigged his bronc and then, taking Jean's picture from under his shirt, he stowed it carefully in his saddlebag. Then, he mounted and rode out the rear door.

There, beside the door, he met Jean Harvey. She was small and dark and pretty, there in the shadows. He drew rein and she said, "Where's Mark, Monroe?"

"In jail. I put him there. He wanted to—well, he'd a gotten into trouble."

"An' Vail? An' his gunmen?"

"They're dead."

"You killed them?"

"Yes."

She breathed, "Thank God," and Monroe saw relief light her face. He took this picture of her into him, storing it and holding it because he knew he would never see her again, and he lifted his hat and said, "Goodbye, Jean."

"Goodbye, Monroe."

Monroe turned his horse and rode north toward Wood Mountain.

THE END

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10c on All Stands

THE DEVIL TAPS THE WIRES

by

FRED W. BALES

Somewhere along the line, a phantom telegrapher was sending out messages to Big George Friday's cutthroats, advising them when a payroll would be shipped. And Kilrain, U. S. Marshal, had to find that ghost or face the death finger himself as the only other possible "brains" for the outlaw gang.

THE locomotive, with labored breathing, herded its brood of baggage and stock cars to a halt at the Jennings station. The drive wheels wailed on the frosty rails and then above their angry complaint there spurted the flat chatter of gunshots.

A muffled cry came from within the mail car; another shot scared echoes from the timbered soundboard of the hills. Bootheels pounded on the depot platform and from the hidden side of the train came the tattoo of retreating hoofs. A cruising engineer leaned from the engine cab, throwing wild shots at two fleeing robbers. Then ominous quiet came, broken only by the babble of excited voices and the indignant gasps of the steam-plumed engine, snorting through its stack.

Coroner Doc Hinchman shouldered through the crowd. He mumbled an order and shocked volunteers lifted from the mail car a man's body. It was that of Specs Hogarth, mail clerk on the Flagstaff & Western branch railway.

"Big George Friday's cutthroats agin!" someone raged. . . .

Kilrain, the United States marshal, stepped from the curtained back room called Doc Hinchman's "mortuary." He squared his shoulders irritably against the weight of wrath upon them; anger for the outlaw killers whose scent had been strong in his nostrils since he had first been assigned to their chase. But Kilrain, in stalking Friday's bandits through this northern Arizona rangeland, had never been within close gun range of his quarry.

The lawman strode on long legs toward the depot, to again scan the scene of Hogarth's murder, the fourth in the bloody ledger of the Friday band.

Nelson, the telegrapher, was engaged in an argumentative game of two-handed stud with a visitor when the marshal pushed into the drafty station. Kilrain's wooden countenance eased into friendly lines. He shook hands with Nelson's companion.

"Wheels, you old coyote! Half the busted saddles on the range in your shop and you squanderin' daylight trying to cheat Nels out of tobacco money."

"Buenos, Kilrain. Sit and rest yore legs. And tell me the news from Flagstaff." A malformed man turned the great trunk of his body in a wheel chair. The twinkling eyes, the fringe of white hair atop his round face gave "Wheels" Wagner the appearance of a convivial monk. It seldom occurred to the saddler's friends that he was

legless; the spell of his lively humor banished need for pity.

"No time for gossip, amigo," replied Kilrain. "If I don't bring in Specs Hogarth's killers I might as well give my badge to you. There'll be need for a smarter marshal!"

"I'm waitin' for the axe too," put in the weary-faced Nelson. "Division boss'll say—'Pull yore bug, tramp. You should've stopped this killin' from happenin'."

"Pshaw, lads, you're lettin' this devil's frolic upset yore jedgement," snorted Wheels. "Changin' federal marshals or telegraph agents ain't no way to round up Friday and his gang. If they're the ones as are guilty, which everyone says. Why, Nels, you're the third operator the road has sent here since Friday's outfit branched out from cattle rustlin' to robbin' trains and stages."

"The road don't blame us," Nelson answered. "It's coverin' for its own sake. Every gold shipment or payroll we've hauled into Jennings has come under telegraph instructions. Us 'hams' and the consignees were the only ones wise to when they were goin' to arrive."

"And Friday's cutthroats—don't forget them!" amended Kilrain laconically, biting off the end of a perfecto.

"But changin' agents ain't proved nothin', except the agents' innocence," argued Wheels. Kilrain grunted assent.

"What was the haul, Nelson?"

"Five thousand in gold coin like we first figured," the telegrapher said. "Had a verification a while ago." He nodded toward his instrument which was stuttering a coded chirp.

"Payroll for the troops Fort Thankful?" Kilrain inquired.

Nelson nodded. "Had wire orders yesterday that the payroll was on its way. I followed routine and relayed the message on to the operator at Jerome."

"Someone overheard those orders—maybe Big George," put in Wheels.

"Someone has heard them before," Kilrain said grimly. "That is the second time this particular payroll has been stolen. Remember? Two weeks ago Nels had orders that the train would be stopped and the army cash transferred to the stagecoach at Redemption Pass. A half hour after the transfer the stage was held up by two

(Continued On Page 101)

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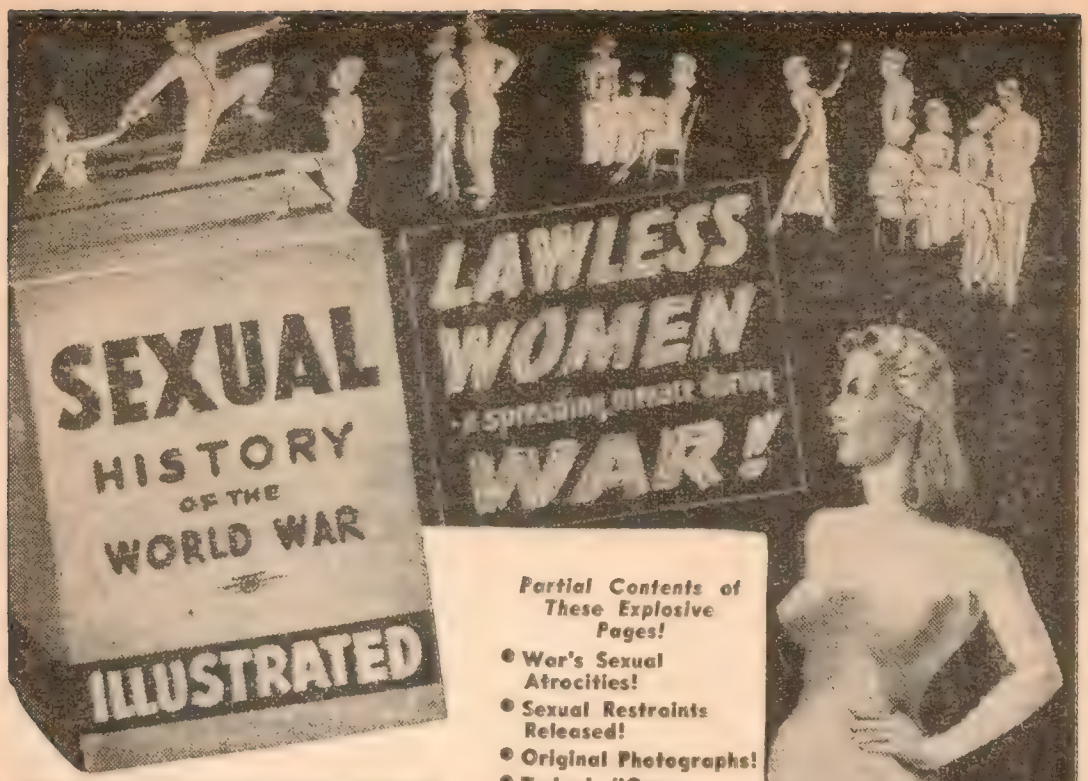

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The Devil Taps the Wires

(Continued From Page 99)

masked hombres and the driver and a shotgun messenger both killed."

"Friday sure outguessed us," Nelson admitted ruefully.

"There is only one answer," declared the lawman. "The railroad wires are tapped. Someone is stealing all messages, probably on a secret telegraph cut-in!"

"By Godfrey!" Wheels rumbled. "Big George's got him a telegraph key! If the road'll climb its poles between here and Flagstaff, I bet it'll find where the wire has been tapped!"

"No, Wheels. It ain't Friday who listens to the wire," Kilrain said quietly. "He is only the strong arm man. There is someone higher up. He's got to be found and broken before his pack is wiped out!"

FROM outside an excited boyish shouting, a canine-yapping accompaniment and a man's deep-throated curse interrupted the three men. Kilrain was out of his chair in an instant and through the door, the saddle-maker rolling on silent wheels behind.

A boy, about thirteen, was on his knees in the rutted road, frightened eyes lifted in apology to the handsome, booted man who glared down upon him. In his arms young Lance Malloy, the laundrywoman's son, clasped a large kite.

"Keep off the streets with your blasted kites, boy, or I'll teach you the feel of a whip," the man snarled, dusting his coat which showed signs of recent collision.

"I didn't see you, Mister Grudge. I'm sorry I ran into you."

"A right proper apology,—as a gentleman does it." Kilrains words fell flatly on the ears of Keno Grudge, owner of the Gilded Mule, Jennings' biggest saloon and ambling house.

"Not that Keno don't savvy good manners," amended Wheels, sarcastically. Keno wheeled in his tracks and his blazing glance locked with Kilrain's. He seemed about to speak but, instead, swept the marshal and the cobbler with the lash of his dislike and turned, striding toward his saloon.

"Don't believe you're one of Keno's favorite folks, friend," chuckled Wheels, and Kilrain said dryly:

"I thrashed him once for cheating at his tables." The tall man's scrutiny rested thoughtfully on the retreating gambler.

Down Greeley street an impatient chuckwagon driver waving a broken bridle

(Continued On Page 102)

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(Continued From Page 101)

bawled profanely for Wheels and the cobbler, grinning, rolled off to haggle with his customer. Kilrain lifted the kneeling boy to his feet.

"You need a stouter wind for good kite flying, lad," he said, his smoky eyes kind.

"I'm getting too old for kites, anyhow, Mister Kilrain," Lance replied and tried to match his stride with that of the lawman. "I bust everyone I make. Except the one I had last summer. I called it 'The Eagle.'"

Kilrain's eyes followed Lance's pointing finger to a leaning telegraph pole behind the row of buildings facing the railroad.

"See, I fouled it in the wires. Ma'd never let me climb up after it. Said it would be trespassing on railroad property."

The skeleton frame of a kite clung like a weary spider to the cross-bars on the pole. Its bedraggled tail fluttered from the bent standard, roping downward toward the face of the embankment, behind which coursed the tunnels of the abandoned Jennings mine.

"I made that tail with a buckskin thong and a muslin piece Ma gave me," the boy was explaining. "Good tails are the secret of kite flying."

Kilrain absently dug his hand into a pocket, pulling forth two silver dollars.

"Lance, see if your Ma has my shirts laundered yet. Deliver them to the hotel. This extra dollar is for yourself."

Grinning speechlessly, the boy dashed away. Kilrain, motionless, was still studying the stranded kite.

Next morning Kilrain idled in his room at the King John. Shortly before noon, he knew, the weekly supply train from the Jawbone mine would roll in, bringing with it a few job-deserting miners, anxious to spend their dust. The town's entire population would be at the depot; he should be unnoticed in what he planned to do.

He heard the train's whistle piping up the gorge and left his room, hastily surveyed the empty street and then began to scale the precipice toward the ghost mine.

The flat top of the table-like mound, the marshal found, was honey-combed by mine shafts. Within arm's length was the top of the tilted telegraph pole. There, on its cross-bars, were the clinging ribs of Lance's lost kite, its tail reaching with inquisitive fingers toward the mouth of an open shaft. Laced through the tail was a wire, one end of which tapped into the singing overhead cable on the railroad. The other, wrapped around the neck of a bottle which served

as an insulator spool to prevent its grounding, disappeared into the ground.

There below, Kilrain knew, the unknown director of the Friday ruffians must have his lawless telegraph key. The underground "depot" was probably reached by its owner through a tunnel from one of the shops or stores at the base of the cliff.

The departing mine train's whistle bleated. Kilrain, heeding its warning, slid, quickly down the steep bank without detection and watched the crowd straggling back from the depot. Thirsty miners, welcomed by Keno Grudge who threw a black glance at Kilrain as they passed, headed for the Gilded Mule. Others, with affable townsmen in tow, crowded into Smoky Joe's. A dozen cowhands, their pintos lathered, pounded up Greeley street. Roaring with boisterous spirits, they jumped the Idaho's hitchrack and ran for the bar. The town will be lively by afternoon, was Kilrain's thought. He must postpone further exploration of the caverns in the cliff.

The lawman turned down the street toward Wheels Wagner's shop. A hand twitched at his sleeve and Lance Malloy said, "Mister Nelson wants to see you."

"Tell him I'll be down within the half hour," Kilrain smiled, and pushed on up the boardwalk to the saddlery. He could hear the cobbler's hammer tapping and he paused, listening to this echo of simple, honest toil. The hammering ceased and in a moment Kilrain ducked through the low door.

"WHEELS, I wasn't around when Billy Grace was blasted," Kilrain said, taking a chair. "And his murder can't be traced to any hidden telegraph key. Still, folks lay it to Friday's gang. Why?"

"Billy Grace?" Wheels mused. "Pore Billy. Played himself for a sucker." He hitched his rolling chair around to face his visitor. "Billy sold one of the biggest herds of prime beef on the range to a buyer in Prescott. Well, he came back with his dinero—all in gold and silver coin in a money belt around his belly. He came to me wearin' it. Had me fix a buckle strap and when I hefted it he told me he was packin' over five thousand dollars. He had been buying drinks for the town and was pretty drunk himself. I made Billy promise to put the belt overnight in the big safe at Keno's. Learned later Keno refused to keep it for him." The cobbler paused,

(Continued On Page 104)

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(Continued From Page 103)

shrugged. "Well, Billy started to ride to the Rocking-H spread sometime after midnight. He was dry-gulched and his wampum stolen. We learned later that Friday and one of his gun-slingers, Jose Sinturro, had camped in the Thunderhead foothills that night. They broke camp and disappeared next day."

Kilrain nodded a farewell to Wheels and walked to the depot. Nelson met him at the door.

"I'm baitin' a varmint trap," was the operator's puzzling greeting and the tall lawman looked at him wonderingly.

"It will take a strong one for the wolves we're after. Where is this trap?"

Nels pointed silently toward his "bug," muttering feebly at his elbow. Kilrain was puzzled.

"I can fake a code message to Flagstaff, tellin' 'em the Drovers' Exchange is sending a gold shipment to the reserve bank on tomorrow's morning train," the agent explained. "The Jennings' relay wire opens a half hour every afternoon. I'll get my 'go ahead' signal now in about fifteen minutes. Someone will be listenin' in with a pirate-bug. And he'll get an earful of fake information!"

The marshal nodded eagerly.

"I'll instruct Flagstaff that I'll carry the pouch of dust from the bank to the depot five minutes before train time," Nelson went on, "and remind 'em to order the mail guard to be packin' his guns."

"How will you justify your loco actions with the railroad?" Kilrain asked.

"If Friday's gun crew don't grab that pouch—which'll contain nothin' but track spikes—before it's on the train, I'll just wire a cancellation on the shipment. If they do grab it, or try to," the telegrapher said quietly, "we'll not need to justify ourselves."

"You're inviting these killers to jump you when you leave the bank!"

"I want you and anyone else you can trust to be on hand, out of sight, when I start from the bank. They'll hit quick. You give me warnin' and I'll drop the pouch and go for cover. Then you unlimber on 'em!"

Kilrain looked at the little operator admiringly. "You call this a trap. It may trap you!"

Nelson had a seamy face, an easygoing face. A thought stirred a flurry across it, and he said, "It'll draw 'em from cover and we can be rid of 'em for good. I

like it here in Jennings. If we can stop these holdups and killin's I can stay here. I'll take my chance!"

Wind shouldered the flimsy depot. The sound of it was cold in Kilrain's ears.

"Good man, Nels!" The marshal shook hands with his ally, and at the door, turned for a moment.

"Send your message, man."

"Friday rides a big roan. He won't be hard to spot," said Nelson. And he bent over his "bug" which was singing, cricket-like, on the table.

A few minutes later Kilrain was sitting at his hotel room window. He had a full survey of Greeley street. The marshal was not surprised in a short while to observe a half-breed rider, one he had often seen slinking around the saloons, pounding a wiry claybank into a run toward the distant foothills of the Thunderhead. . .

Keno Grudge was sitting at a table in the Gilded Mule drinking with one of his women when Kilrain slipped into a chair opposite him that night. The girl, her eyes sullen, vanished at Keno's gesture and the gambler turned to face his visitor.

"What's on your mind, Kilrain?"

"You've got the answer to a question that's puzzlin' me," the marshal replied. "I've come to get it."

"This whole town's got a question for you to answer, marshal," the saloon owner sneered. "When are you going to round up George Friday? When are you going to start looking for his hideout in the mountains, instead of on Greeley street?"

"Easy, Keno!" Anger smoked in Kilrain's eyes. "You answer my question first. On the night before Billy Grace was bush-whacked, why did you refuse to keep his money belt in your safe overnight?"

For a long moment Grudge returned Kilrain's look. His voice was cold, steady.

"Billy never spent any money with me. Like some others who lose hard, he claimed my games were crooked. He was a heavy spender in other barrooms in Jennings. But not in Keno's place. So why should I act as his banker; be responsible for his poke?"

A grin twisted at Kilrain's lips as he stood up to depart. "Keno, I must confess you've got me there. Why should you, indeed?"

NEXT morning both friendly and hostile watchers saw Nelson leave the Drovers Exchange carrying a buckskin bag.

(Continued On Page 106)

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 105)

At various hidden points, the rail agent knew, alert guns guarded his advance into the open street. Then, because it was in the cards that it must happen, from far down the street beyond the last straggling cabins came the sharp sound of a shot. Nelson wheeled nervously toward the sound, then realized, tardily, that it was a decoy or signal.

"Run, man!" a deputy, flattened on the roof of a feed store, shouted hoarsely. The telegrapher dropped the leather pouch; dove for the cover of a mud-sled leaning against a nearby wall. Another sound, now reached Kilrain's ears; it came from the opposite direction, however, a ragged tattoo which grew into the sullen pound of horses running. Then a fusillade of gunfire. There were three dust-covered riders, neck-pieces hiding their faces. But the mask and broad-brimmed black hat failed to hide the flaming hair of their leader, Big George.

The bawl of exploding guns rose in a wave as Kilrain stepped out of the blacksmith shop, both Colts ablaze. The keen voice of a Winchester came from a roof and two crouching deputies started a flanking cross-fire from the bank corner.

A black-browed outlaw pitched screaming from his horse; another jumped from the saddle, starting for the pouch on the street, and then fell, coughing blood. Friday's roan squealed, floundered to its knees, and the outlaw slid from his mount lighting erect. His rocking guns snapped emptily and Big George knew he was dead. Knowing it, he turned like a beast at bay, raking the street end to end with a terrible glance as if seeking and condemning someone who had betrayed him. A bullet from somewhere struck him from his feet and he fell with a final curse. The bodies of his two gun-slingers sprawled nearby.

Exultant shouts rolled down Greeley street, led by Wheels Wagner who rolled forward, a smoking derringer in one hand. Men, holstering guns, popped from doorways. Keno Grudge shouted, "Drinks on the house!" The Friday outlaws had come to the end of their trail. One, the most dangerous one, still sulked in the shadows. So Kilrain mused an hour later, as he sat on his hotel room bed, cleaning his still hot guns.

He stepped to the window, glancing soberly at the street below. There were only a few stragglers left, reliving the re-

cent duel. Two of them, a man and a boy, young Lance Malloy, pressed through a circle of arguing cowboys and vanished from Kilrain's sight. It was only a little later that he heard a tapping at his door.

The lawman called a greeting and a woman's voice answered. "Mister Kilrain? It is myself, Mrs Malloy. Did my boy find you?" Kilrain threw open the door to the flushed little woman in the hall.

Mister Kilrain! Lance found the hidden telygraft wire. I told him to locate ye at once—"

The lawman had already grabbed his gun harness and was descending the stairs, horror in his brain, before the laundrywoman had finished.

As he ran he grabbed a coiled rope from the saddle of a horse, nodding at a hitchrack. In a building nearby, he knew, there must be an entrance to that rock-bound chamber at the foot of the mine shaft. That entrance would be locked. These thoughts raced with him as he scrambled up the cliff, toward the beckoning kite tail. At the mouth of the shaft he knotted his rope about a timber, playing the free end into the narrow artery which led straight downward. Then grabbing the lariat in both hands he slid feet first into the shaft.

His feet struck the bottom with jarring suddenness and in the shadows Kilrain saw a narrow tunnel, at the other end of which light flared. It was too late for caution. He plunged toward that light. Then something caught at his knees and as he sprawled forward he realized that it was a taut wire, cleverly strung across the tunnel's mouth, which had brought him down. He was struggling to his feet, slapping at his holster, when the voice came from behind him.

"Don't try it, amigo! Stand up, but keep yore hands in the air! And first drop yore guns. Ah! That's better. More friendly like—" The chuckling voice rumbled on. "You see, Kilrain, I knew some day we'd have a showdown!"

"Your game's up, Wheels!" said the marshal as he slowly turned, hands held high.

"Perhaps. So is Kilrain's!" The cobbler, his wicked derringer pointing unwaveringly, grinned mockingly. His eyes, however, did not smile and the marshal noticed, for the first time, something queer about those unblinking eyes. The saddler, Kilrain then realized, was quite mad.

(Continued On Page 108)

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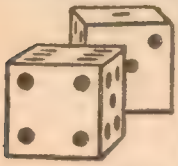

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 107)

There was a movement in the shadows behind Wheel's rolling chair and Kilrain saw the trussed figure of Lance on the stone floor. The boy was apparently unharmed and the lawman felt rekindled hope. He cursed his folly for not having played his hunch and unmasked the evil saddler when he had seen him with Lance on the street. Unluckily, he could not have known that the boy had pierced the secret of the illicit wire; had trustingly enlisted the cobbler's aid in searching for Kilrain.

"YES, Kilrain," the legless man was saying. "A boy's kite was the undoing of old Wheels, the simple saddler, who made himself and George Friday rich through his knowledge of Morse code. Years ago, you see, I was a 'ham' operator on the Union Pacific. I lost both legs under one of their accursed trains. They paid me five thousand dollars each for my legs,—enough to set me up in my boyhood trade of harness-mending. And enough left over to finance George Friday's weakness for rustling. Then we branched out and located in Jennings when the Flagstaff & Western put its road through here. You know the rest."

"And folks knew you as an honest citizen. You've been clever, Wheels," the marshal answered bitterly. "Even to your fake part in the gun battle with the outlaws a while ago."

"That was not faked," Wheels said. "I shot Friday! Couldn't afford to let him be captured. Just as I can't afford to let you and young Lance live. Yore bodies will never be found here. And honest Wheels, the saddler, will be as puzzled as anyone else over your strange disappearance!" The man's eyes were malevolent.

Kilrain, in desperation, thought of hurling himself at his captor despite the threat of the derringer, but he feared for the boy on the floor. It was then that he noticed that Lance had silently rolled over until his feet were within inches of one wheel of the cobbler's chair. He could see the boy's strained face, his eyes desperately trying to convey a message to his friend.

"Before I close yore mouths for good," Wheels said meaningly, "tell me, amigo, when did you first become suspicious of me?"

"The day I came to ask you about Billy Grace's murder," the lawman replied. "You were at work before I came in. You were

absent-minded. Tapped out the Jennings depot call letters and then the 'go ahead' signal with your hammer! You see, I know a little of the Morse code myself!"

"Smart thinking, Kilrain," and Wheels' admiration sounded genuine. "And now, meddler, I must—" Kilrain felt Death enter the underground chamber.

It was Lance who first accepted the challenge. Like an angry horse the boy lashed out with his feet, striking the wheel of the chair. It rocked under the blow just as the derringer spoke and Kilrain, diving toward his guns on the floor, felt stinging blood on the lobe of an ear. As he jumped the marshal struck with a booted heel, kicking the gun from the cobbler's hand. Then a tremendous fist exploded against his jaw. Dazed, but on his feet again, a six-shooter palmed, Kilrain knew sickeningly he was too late. A heavy, oaken door, the secret gateway from the shaft to the harness shop, banged shut and there was the rattle of a bolt, the receding whisper of a rolling chair.

Precious minutes passed in the loosening of Lance's bonds and the difficult hand-over-hand climb up the rope through the narrow shaft. Kilrain's glance swept the street below and he saw the faces of idlers who were gaping in bewilderment in the direction of a railway switch where a branch track led off into the pines and disappeared through a canyon. It was the sidetracks used by the Jawbone mine.

Scuttling along the bumpy tracks in his wheel chair like a grotesque insect and shrieking defiance was the deranged cobbler. The puzzled spectators took up Kilrain's warning commands, but Wheels' chair crept on. Just as the weird fugitive disappeared through the cut, Kilrain and Lance heard with horror the frantic bleat of a mine locomotive and the pounding of its drive wheels.

There was a ghastly moment of near silence, broken only by the echoes of the engine whistle, and then another sound, inhuman and horrible. Kilrain's work was done; the hunt was over.

"It's probably best it ended like it did," Nelson said later, when Kilrain was waiting for a train which would take him back to Flagstaff.

"It would not have been pleasant—pullin' his chair out from under him on the gallows. Hangin' must be bad enough if a man has his legs to stand on while they're fixin' the noose."

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MOKELUMNE—Gateway To Hell

A Fact Article

DURING the frenzied gold stampede of 1849 men died with their boots on, as a general rule, in the bloodiest "Helldorado" on the continent—Mokelumne, California. Death came suddenly and unexpectedly to many of the miners in that roaring mushroom camp. Death hovered in the air over Mokelumne's golden mountains and valleys, to descend at the crack of a rifle or six-gun. Hard times never came to the local undertakers and grave-diggers while the population of Boothill increased.

At no time in the annals of the American frontier was life so cheaply bought. The precious yellow metal was for every one the all-alluring dream. It lay beneath the newcomers feet in inexhaustible stores, and they thought of nothing but possessing it by fair means or foul. Thus Mokelumne quickly degenerated into a hotbed of protracted feuds, street brawls, claim-jumping, lynchings and pistol duels. Human lives were snuffed out for greed, for revenge, and sometimes merely "for fun."

Life in the wild boom camp and adjacent placer diggings was precarious at all times. Men had to live by their guns. Prospectors "washing dirt" in the gold-lined river bed worked knee-deep in water with a brace of heavy six-shooters strapped to their hips, while a loaded rifle always stood within reach. Gold was everything—life was cheap.

Mokelumne Hill was about the worst hell camp in California. "Who was shot last week?" was the first question asked by the miners when they came in from the river or surrounding diggings on Saturday night or Sunday morning to gamble their dust or to buy supplies. It was seldom that the answer was "No one."

In those days the gaming tents were the most attractive spots in town. They were commodious affairs, devoted to gambling on a large scale, and were about the only

by KENNETH WOOD

faces warmed by fires. Some of these circus-like tents had well-furnished and elaborate bars where liquor was dispensed at a dollar a glass. Tables were arranged along the sides and in rows through the center, at which monte, roulette, faro, lansquenet, chuck-a-luck, vingt-et-un, and countless other games of chance were played. During Mokelumne's heyday the Eldorado Tent paid a rental of $40,000 a year, and staked as high as $20,000 on the lucky turn of a card.

When the whole was ablaze with kerosene flood lights of an evening, occasional sloe-eyed Mexican girls assisted at the games, and a band of music or singers gave forth a concourse of discordant sounds. Crowds surged around the gambling tables and in front of the bars, some attracted by the novelty, some to get warm, but more to try their luck with cards.

In this rude settlement where living was high and life was cheap, this is the sort of menu that confronted hungry prospectors with fat pokes of dust, in the Square Deal Dining Tent:

SOUP

Bean $1.00 Oxtail (short) $1.50

ROAST

Beef, Mexican (prime cut) $1.50
Beef, plain 1.00
Beef (tame) from the States ... 1.50
Beef (up along) 1.00
With one spud (fair size) 1.25

VEGETABLES

Baked beans, plain, 75c; greased, $1.00
Two spuds (fair size) 50c; peeled, 75c

ENTREES

Sauerkraut $1.00
Bacon, fried, $1.00; stuffed, $1.25
Hash, low grade, 75c Hash, 18 carats, $1.00

GAME

Codfish balls, per pair, 75c
Jackass rabbit (whole) $1.00
Grizzly, fried, 75c Grizzly, roast, $1.00

(Continued On Page 112)

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 111)

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Rice pudding, plain, 75c

Rice pudding with molasses, $1.00

Rice pudding with brandy peaches, $2.00

Square Meal $3.00 in advance

Gold scales at end of bar

It was in the famous Nugget Tent where they used to play big poker. At the game one night sat several newly fledged mining millionaires with money to burn and with plenty of sporting spirit to burn it, when in came a newly arrived tenderfoot who timidly asked if he might take a hand.

"Why, yes. . .come right in," invited the dealer.

With some ostentation the newcomer placed a ten dollar gold piece on the table. "Let me have chips for that," he said gravely.

He went to hang up his coat and hat. When he returned the gold piece still lay on the table where he had placed it.

"What's the matter, gentlemen?" he asked haughtily. "Ain't my money good?"

"Why, yes, to be sure," said the dealer. "Eddie, give the gentleman one white chip."

Establishing law and order in this hard-shooting, hard-drinking community was a heart-breaking job, but when the law-abiding citizens got together and finally put in motion the crushing wheels of retributive justice, a general protest was raised against the professional gamblers. The result was that the card business commenced to decline, and the tinhorns departed for parts unknown. One of them, after he had packed his chips, cards and other paraphernalia, left hurriedly with the typical Parthian shot:

"They're gettin' too damned partiklar in these parts nowadays. If a feller pulls his gun in self-defense anymore an' happens to blow the top of a miner's head off, these jaspers haul him up before a jury. There ain't no more freedom. Seems like the good old times are about washed up an' the country's plum' played out."

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The purpose of sex—how conception takes place — secondary stimuli zones — attaining highest pitch in compatibility.

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The importance of preparation—first act the courtship or love-making—second part of the Coitus—many positions possible—final act or climax—half hour all too short for courtship—develop mutual sexual rhythm—reaching a climax together—women often unsatisfied — problems of physical mismatching—overcoming difficulties.

Chapter 6—Secrets of Sex Appeal
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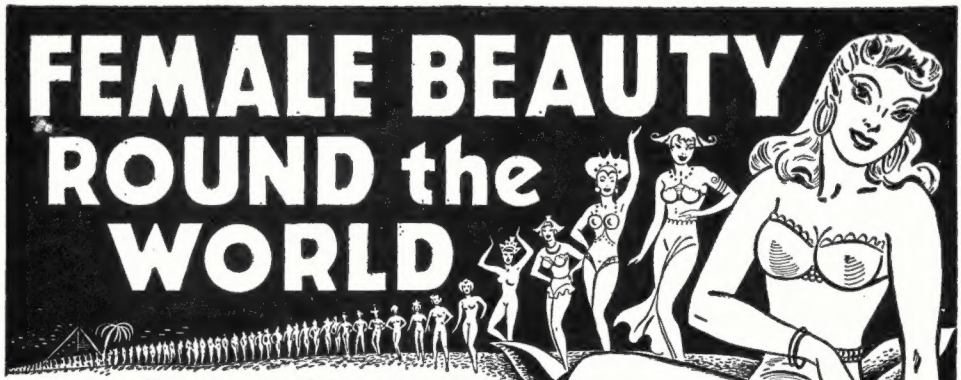

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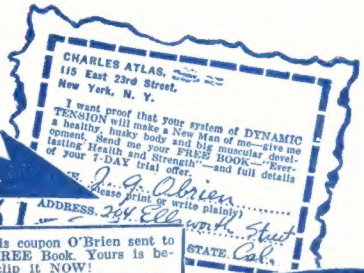

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